NOVEL 4
THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...
written by
TEREN MIKAMI
Illustrated by
EKU TAKESHIMA

Table of Contents

Color Inserts
Table of Contents Page
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Prologue
Chapter 1: There's No Freaking Way I Can Be Buddy-Buddy with Kaho-chan!
Chapter 2: There's No Freaking Way I Can Do My First Cosplay!
Chapter 3: There's No Freaking Way I Can Do This Performance! Unless…
Minaguchi Kaho's Story
Chapter 4: There's No Freaking Way We Can Stay Like This Forever. Right?
Chapter 5 Preface: Otherwise Known as Mai's Side of the Story
Chapter 6: There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless…
Epilogue
Intermission: Satsuki and Amaori 2
Afterword
Creator Bios
Newsletter

Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

THERE'S NO FREAKING WAY
I'LL BE YOUR LOVER!
UNLESS...

AMAORI RENAKO
ODUKA MAI
I took a photo out, the one that'd been taken of all three of us in that photography studio over summer vacation. In the photograph, my smile was awkward, but I seemed happy enough with both Mai and Ajisai-san standing next to me. I wished that the three of us could have stayed like that forever, never changing. But unlike them, I was still stuck in that summer day, and now I was left behind in the dust.
SENA AJISAI

There was a full-length mirror in front of us, so I had a crystal-clear view of Kaho-chan's bright red face. With her hair untied and her head hung low, she looked so pretty that my heart unintentionally skipped a beat.
"Besides, I think you're plenty cute as you are."
"Th-thanks. But, uh, could you cool it with the compliments a little?"
She folded in on herself even further. The difference between this behavior and that of the normal Kaho-chan was astronomical, and it made her look all that much cuter.
It also made me feel weird. I almost wanted to keep messing with her to evoke even cuter, more embarrassed expressions.

HELPING KAHO-CHAN WITH HER HOBBY:
A GROUP COSPLAY PHOTOSHOOT
NAGIPO
RENAKOALA

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE .....

1 There's No Freaking Way I Can Be Buddy-Buddy with Kaho-chan! .....

2 There's No Freaking Way I Can Do My First Cosplay! .....

3 There's No Freaking Way I Can Do This Performance! UNLESS... .....

4 There's No Freaking Way We Can Stay Like This Forever. Right? .....

5 Otherwise Known as Mai's Side of the Story .....

6 There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! UNLESS... .....

EPILOGUE .....

MINAGUCHI KAHO'S STORY 1

There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless...

4

WRITTEN BY

Teren Mikami

ILLUSTRATED BY

Eku Takeshima

Seven Seas Entertainment

WATASHIGA KOIBITONI NARERUWAKE NAIJAN, MURIMURI!
(MURI JA NAKATTA!?)
© 2021 by Teren Mikami, Eku Takeshima
All rights reserved.
First published in Japan in 2021 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged by SHUEISHA Inc.
through TOHAN CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form without written permission from the copyright
holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are the products of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events,
locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.
Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this
book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily
reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: TNFWIBYLU Translation Team
ADAPTATION: Harry Catlin
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Jennifer Elgabrowny
COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner
PROOFREADER: Jehanne Bell
EDITOR: Callum May
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: JASON DEANGELIS

ISBN: 979-8-88843-443-7
Printed in Canada
First Printing: May 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Prologue

OH EM GEE, yaaaaaaay! My life is just soooo good!

Heya, everybody! It's your girl, Amaori Renako! I used to be a complete depresso messo, but then I had a tooootal glow-up when I hit high school! Now I'm in my first year of school at Ashigaya High where I occupy a spot in the top rank of the school's social caste. And guess what? Out of my five-girl friend group, two of them have crushes on me. What's a girl to do? Noooo, don't fight over me, guys! 🙈 Uwaaaaah! (omg lol tho)

I was soooo super-duper thrown for a loop when this happened to me. Like, it legit feels like I'm dreaming. I mean, me? I'm just a total nobody. I'm nothing but a cookie-cutter copy of every other girl ever!!! uwu

During break, I barricaded myself in the stiflingly hot girls' bathroom far from the classroom and put my head in my hands.

"How the heck did this happen?" I muttered like I was casting a curse. "I'm just trying to do my best and get through the day, man…but now I'm out here awakening my latent talent for being a bubbly teen."

Summer vacation was over, and we'd been back at school for barely even a week at this point. Yet, all the same, I could feel myself approaching the end of my rope with every passing second.

I heard the sound of several someones coming in. I mean, it was a school bathroom, so of course people would walk in. But I still flinched and held my breath.

"God, school is the actual worst," one of the girls outside my stall said. "I wish summer break could go on forever."

"Actual same," said another girl's voice.

I didn't know who these voices belonged to, thankfully. For a split second, I thought one of my friends might have been coming to find me. Someone was a little too full of herself there, methinks.

"Oh hey, did you hear about Takuma?" one of the girls said. "So,

like, I heard he asked out Oduka Mai."

"Oh my god, did he really? Get out."

I froze all over again when I heard them name-drop my friend like that. Afterward, I only caught dribs and drabs of the rest of their conversation.

"Yeah, like, and doesn't Shindou have a thing for Koto Satsuki?"

"Oh, is she his type?"

"I mean, like, I get it."

"Oh yeah, and Sena's really popular too."

"Yeah?"

"The guys are gaga over her."

"They are down *so* bad, girl."

"I know, right?"

"Everyone loves her."

I could hear them laughing and having a ball through the stall door. I guess the names of the prettiest girls at Ashigaya High could magically bring happiness to whoever spoke them.

The girls carried on gabbing away for a while and then left the bathroom.

Believe me, I *got* it. I knew perfectly well that my friends lived in a very different world from me. No one ever dropped my name into a conversation like that, and if they did, I'm pretty darn sure it was no magic word. Trust me, I'd been fully aware of that for ages now.

I waited a short period of time and then left my stall. My face reflected in the bathroom mirror was utterly blank, a face free of recognizable emotion.

When I walked into class, I set off for my seat on autopilot, trying to blend into the background as was my habit, when someone waved and called, "Hey!" Ajisai-san, the girl who sat in front of me in class, grinned nonchalantly. "Welcome back, Rena-chan."

“Oh, hey, I guess…”

It hit me just then, as I nodded to her blankly, that this wasn’t right. I was a cheerful, outgoing sort, one of the most popular kids in the class, and the love interest for several of the most beautiful girls in school to boot. I cut an impressive figure.

I threw a body blow at the inner me and gave Ajisai-san a sunny smile. “Hey, thanks!” I chirped. “You wanna hear something wild? The bathroom was so crowded, it was like a forty-five-minute line for a theme park ride! I’m going to have to get myself a fast pass for next time.”

“What’re you talking about?” Ajisai-san giggled. I’m sure her smile must have looked as cute as ever, but I didn’t dare look.

“No, I swear!” I insisted. “Oh, that’d actually be a really good idea. We could each get one daily bathroom ticket and use it to get priority access to the bathrooms once a day or something. It could be a smartphone app. You’d use your phone to feed into a scanner in the bathroom, you know!”

“Huh?” she said. “That sounds hard to use.”

“Okay, fine, then let’s just go with tickets!” I prattled on with a grin. “They could pass one out to us every morning as we come in the gate. After school, we could exchange any unused tickets for a tasty snack or something… Oh, wait, but then I guess no one would want to use them.”

Only after I was done talking did the meaning of what I’d been saying register in my ears. I was horrified that I might have said something I shouldn’t have, but I simply couldn’t stop myself.

Yet Ajisai-san just laughed again. Thankfully, she seemed to be enjoying my nonsense (lord only knows why). I relaxed and, for that one brief moment where I felt like I’d hit upon the right thing to say, actually felt alive.

Just then, the teacher came in. “Later,” Ajisai-san said as she turned around to face forward. The tumultuous roar of the class faded away, and it was time for math.

Sena Ajisai was my classmate and, if you’ll permit me the use of a metaphor, an angelic being. She looked both gentle and brilliant, and

her voice was soft and sweet. Not only was she kind, but she had a core of steel, and she was skilled enough to carry on a conversation with me for ages without us getting bored. Ajisai-san was out of this world. She was like if everyone on Earth put together their ideas about an ideal girl, mixed them up, and cooked 'em into a pancake.

And this very same girl had asked *me* out over summer break.

"Rena-chan, I really like you. Would you go out with me?" In those exact words.

It was such a perfect, classical way to ask someone out, the words anyone would have loved to hear. Sure, it may have been a little unorthodox for both parties to be girls, but all the same, that offer should have made me feel like I was ascending straight to heaven. From then on out, my days should have been bright and rosy and happy forever, right…?

But that's not exactly how it turned out.

As I stared off into space at the blackboard, I thought back to how it all went down.

***

It was evening in the park, and Ajisai-san stood in front of me, having just mustered up the courage to tell me she liked me.

"S-sure…" I said.

Then, a few seconds later, I had a light-bulb moment.

"Wait, hold on!" I said. A chill traveled down my spine as I realized what I'd just said. "That's not what I meant!"

Half in a state of panic at this point, I yelled, "Like, I'm really grateful you feel that way about me. I mean, I had no idea you thought about me like that. It's, um, really nice to hear! It's super, super nice, but, um! I just. Um. You know!"

Like I was an empty tombola, no words would come out no matter how much I spun my wheels. As I got more and more frantic, I felt my peripheral vision starting to go.

Ajisai-san breathed a long sigh. She gripped her chest, like time had been stopped up until this one moment.

“Whew,” she said. “That made me such a ball of nerves.” Then she beamed. “I probably gave you the shock of your life saying that out of the blue, huh?”

“Oh, no, I mean—I’m really glad to hear it! I swear, I…I swear!”

“It’s okay. I just wanted to be selfish and get it off my chest. Thanks for hearing me out.”

As she smiled at me, I desperately tried to break down what she’d just said. So this meant. Uh. So this meant what, exactly? I mean, this was Ajisai-san we were talking about, so I doubted it was a prank or anything like that. But then the question begged: Why did she say she liked me? And, you know, wanted to go out with me and all?

I stood stock-still helplessly. I didn’t have the faintest clue what I was supposed to be doing, like I’d been dragged along on a trip to the bank with my parents.

I felt so at a loss that I looked to Mai for rescue. Seriously, what the heck was going on? Mai had only been watching us the whole time without any sort of reaction, but now she cleared her throat and stepped in.

“Ah, pardon me, but…does this mean you two are now a couple?”

Ajisai-san giggled. “Maybe.” Her voice sounded so disconnected from reality that it was like her feet weren’t touching the ground, oddly similar to the kind of shrieking I produced whenever I lost my mind.

“Well, this development certainly gave me quite the shock,” Mai said.

“Did I getcha too?”

“You did. But you’re a lovely person, Ajisai, so that explains why she said yes. I must say, I’m rather proud that your charm was able to get through to her.”

“That’s all thanks to you, Mai-chan,” said Ajisai-san.

I didn’t have the faintest clue what the two of them were talking about. Since when had they been so buddy-buddy anyway? And how come Mai was so calm? I mean, considering how much Mai liked me, it would only have been natural for her to raise objections if I’d unintentionally said yes. Maybe she didn’t like me anymore, then.

No. That didn’t make sense. At any rate, I had Ajisai-san to worry

about first.

"Um, I mean…" I said. "Dating's a bit…much…"

Even if you reached out to try and grab it, you could never take anything back once it'd been spoken out loud. That's the exact reason why people have been at war for millennia.

Sweat dripped down my back. My ears rang.

"Um…" I said. It was ingrained in me to shoot down this kind of offer straight up whenever anyone suggested it to me. Besides, since I'd been keeping Mai on hold this whole time, there was no way I could make an exception for Ajisai-san. That would have been way too self-serving.

There was no freaking way I could go out with her, but I wanted us to be friends. I'd said that once to Mai already, but could I really say the same thing to Ajisai-san now? I mean, really? Considering how lowly I was and everything?

"Could you…" I began.

"Could I what?" she prompted. Ajisai-san stared at me, making me want to vanish on the spot.

I sounded like I was about to die as I asked, "Could you…give me a little time?"

"Time?"

"Yeah… You know, a little time to think before…I give you my answer."

Ajisai-san gave me a serious look and nodded. "Okay."

"Y-yeah, thanks…"

"How long are we talking?" she asked.

"Huh?!"

It was just a normal question, but I still felt like a sinner dragged to stand before God.

My mouth moved on its own and shot for the upper limit. "L-like, three years, maybe?"

"Huh?" Her eyes widened. Wait, no, no, no!

"No, I mean, one month!" I said. "How does that sound?"

I felt like a month was a pretty long time to wait for an answer to a confession. However, she very considerately went, “S-sure, okay. Sounds good to me, Rena-chan.”

I was a constant putter-offer of problems, but I mean…if I’m going to be real, I couldn’t wrap my head around why she was asking me out, to the point where I felt like I was going to stop breathing any minute. If Ajisai-san kept looking at me like that for much longer, I was going to asphyxiate and die.

She put her hand out, and I squeaked. Then she took my index finger and squeezed it. Her hand felt very warm.

“You know I really meant it, right, Rena-chan?” she said. “This is legit how I feel about you.”

I could feel that. I could feel exactly how she felt. Yeah, I understood. Ajisai-san was always so earnest, so resolute, so admirable. But I just couldn’t fully accept it.

She grinned. “You really don’t need to force yourself to say yes, you know. But I’ll be waiting for your response, ’kay?”

“Oh, uh, sure…”

I couldn’t say anything else.

Ajisai-san left, followed by Mai, who still looked as if she had something she wanted to say. I was then left all alone. I looked down at my hand and whispered to myself, “But why, Ajisai-san?”

I was damned now that I’d put Ajisai-san on hold after she’d confessed such precious feelings to me. Now that her light had shone upon me, it was time for me to face my own internal darkness.

A week later, school began. There were four weeks left in the countdown until my response, and yet I could still hardly breathe.

***

“Ah…” I sighed.

I dangled over the fence on the deserted rooftop, transforming into a quilt in the process. As I blew in the wind, I felt like I was becoming one with the earth below. From where I stood, a human life was such a very trivial thing. I could feel all my troubles blowing

away…except they didn't. The noise of lunch break reminded me that, whether I liked it or not, I was a member of society. Right, I was a person. Not a quilt.

The metal door squeaked open behind me.

"Aha. There you are," said a voice.

I didn't have to turn around to know who it was, because I could tell Oduka Mai was here. She came up and stood next to me. With her ridiculously impressive proportions and her long, beautiful blonde hair, you couldn't mistake her for anything but a model in the prime of her career. Mai had brilliant grades, fantastic athletic ability, a jaw-dropping appearance, and an incredible professional reputation to boot. She'd basically been gifted godly talent, making her the most well-loved girl in school. We'd given her the nickname of super darling, or "supadari" for short.

Sure, she had her bossy moments, but I was positive that anyone who dated Mai would turn out to be one heck of a happy camper, hands down. If someone got asked out by her and turned her down, either because they had bogus taste or a horribly wack personality, said someone was probably better off dead. Like me, for instance.

"This reminds me of the time when you and I first got to know each other," Mai said. Her voice was always as well tuned as an electric piano.

"Yeah," I said. "For real."

As Mai grinned and leaned against the fence, the vision of loveliness that she presented made my heart accidentally skip a beat. I really wasn't cut out to be around her, and yet, here she was.

I looked down.

"Hey, I'm sorry, Mai," I said.

"Hm?"

I stared at the concrete. The words spilled out of my mouth and hit the pavement below like tears. "I mean…about that whole thing."

"That whole thing" encompassed the non-exhaustive list of Ajisai-san's confession, my half-assed answer to her, and the happiness I'd shown despite Mai being there. But all of that was too stupid to say outright, so the best I could do was dance around the topic.

“That whole…thing, you say?” Mai chuckled with a little puff of breath, like an exhale. “Well, I hadn’t expected that outcome, but I feel as if at least part of the responsibility is mine.”

My head rocketed up. “No, it’s not!” I yelled.

That made Mai jump. I looked away, feeling awkward. “Oh, never mind, it’s just… I know that, when it all comes down to it, I shouldn’t be so wishy-washy…”

I felt bad that I couldn’t even look Mai in the eyes, but I squatted down to my knees. “After you already told me you had feelings for me, it was really wrong of me to say yes to Ajisai-san, even if I was just on autopilot. I’m awful.”

“Considering my position, I think it’d be rather odd for me to side with you. However…” Mai looked up at the overcast sky. I couldn’t tell what was going through her mind right now. “Yes, I think it would be awfully cruel for you to move on and date Ajisai-san after you let me woo you. However, you and I aren’t exactly girlfriends yet, are we? In that case, I don’t suppose you’re under any obligation, *per se*, to stay with me.”

“I mean…” The fact that Mai was so sympathetic now, of all times, threw me for a loop. We were just friends with Renafits, that was all. Sure, that meant that we cherished each other and had decided to spend our three years of high school together—and yeah, maybe we kissed now and then—but like Mai had just said, that didn’t make us girlfriends. Still, I mean…

“No, I can’t,” I said. I gripped the fence hard. “I mean, I… Come on, Mai, I said I’d really give it some thought about being with you…”

There was a beat, and then Mai said, “Well, what if you gave it some thought, and this was the result?”

“But I’m really not done thinking about it. Like, at all.” I shook my head. God, I felt awful. I opened my mouth like I was about to vomit up some foreign substance and said, “I can’t date her, not before I give you a proper response.”

My voice sounded way too stubborn and hostile to my own ears. It wasn’t the right sort of tone to use on Mai, not when she was so concerned for me.

She let out another breathy sigh. “Whom do you like better, Ajisai

or me? Isn't that all it comes down to?"

I held my head in my hands. "I don't know; that's the thing… I don't know what the heck this whole…liking people business is about."

How come Mai liked me? How come Ajisai-san liked me? None of it made any sense.

"I mean, *I* don't even like myself," I groaned.

I could never have said that in front of Ajisai-san, not in a million years, because if I tried to put myself down, I'd be putting her down too. I couldn't just be like, "The person you say you want to date sucks. I hate her." You can't just say that to someone. But it came out so easily around Mai, even though Mai should have been in the same boat as Ajisai-san. Not even that, really. If anything, Mai was the first person to see the good in me.

"Oh…" Mai said.

When I looked up, I saw her silently smiling down at me. She placed her hand on my shoulder. "You know," she told me, "*I* like you."

I didn't say anything. Why, oh why, was Mai so nice to me? And then, in spite of all her kindness, I just couldn't fall for her. Not even that—it was more that when she cast her light on me, it only made my dark shadow stretch ever longer.

It was all very weird to begin with. When Ajisai-san had asked me out, my first reaction should have been, "Oh my god, I'm so happy!" right? Right, exactly. Or, if we're talking about when it really sinks in later, most people would have realized how lucky they were, you know? But throughout all of this, the only thing running through my mind was the desire to run away.

"You know, I…" I began.

And then it hit me. I finally got it. It wasn't that I wanted people to like me after all. All those big dreams I had—I want to be someone's special someone, I want to be your best friend, I want to be number one in your heart—were nothing but lies. *I want to tag along when you guys go somewhere. I want to be allowed to fit in. I want everyone to listen to me when I talk. I want you all to react to the things I do.* It all came down to one single thing:

I just didn't want people to *hate* me.

So maybe the reason I didn't want to date anyone was because if they saw who I really was deep inside, they would hate me. Well, no. Nix the "maybe." That was absolutely the reason.

I mean, I knew myself better than anyone else, and I loathed my guts. That's why I forced myself to keep my distance, no matter how many times Mai came after me. If I kept everyone at arm's length, then maybe people could look at *me*, even, and think, "You know, she's not too bad after all." I could carry on hiding my real self, pretending I wasn't depressed, and keep my friendships that way. I could manage to maintain my relationships without anyone ever finding out how shallow my personality was.

And yet, whenever someone tried to move away, I clung to them. I seemed to want them close—to show them off. All this business about wanting a real friend was bullshit. I know I'd said that I wanted a relationship where we could show each other our shortcomings, but wasn't I just seeking proof that someone could look at me and not hate me? It was all about me, me, me, me, me, m—

Just then, Mai stroked my cheek. "Huh?" I said. I looked up, and there she was, her beautiful face right next to mine. We looked at each other for a few seconds, and in that short moment, all the thoughts in my screwed-up mind stopped. I wondered if she was about to kiss me. Maybe if she forced me to ask her, I could forget my own lack of self-esteem for a moment. You know, you see that all the time in manga and stuff, when one character's like, "Please, help me forget about everything."

But Mai didn't move in any further and instead removed her hand. "I think that's enough for today," she said.

"Mai…"

It wasn't that I wanted to kiss her, nor did I really want her to kiss me. But when she didn't, an unease set in that maybe I'd blown my last chance and she hated me. And now there was nothing to be done about it.

There was sadness in Mai's eyes, and she was now walking away from me. We'd been such good friends, but I could no longer remember the times we used to smile together. The rooftop door closed behind her with a thud.

I sank to the ground and cradled my knees. Tears of self-loathing trickled down my cheeks, and I began to sob.

My junior-high self looked down on me with eyes full of scorn. *Did you see that?* she whispered. *Quit being a little baby. You know that this whole goal of yours to be social was doomed from the start.*

And she was right. It's not like people called me rude names or beat me up. They didn't even really shun me. Honestly, everyone was super nice. No one was mad at me at all. But here I was, overwhelmed and anguished, a complete emotional wreck and a total piece of shit. *Oh, Mai and Ajisai-san,* I thought, *I'm really sorry.*

If only I could have been as dazzling, as powerful, as proactive as they thought I was. Failing that, it'd have been just as good to have the resolution and power to fool them all forever. It would have been nice not to be such a miserable sack of crap who only cared about what other people thought and was constantly going out of her way just to ensure other people wouldn't hate her.

I'm really, really sorry. I'm really sorry I misled you both.

"I want to die," I admitted.

The bell rang for the end of lunch, but I didn't go back to the classroom. Instead, I skipped class for the first time ever in high school.

I ditched all my afternoon classes and only went back to the classroom when everyone already seemed to have gone home. Oh great, playing hooky, huh? I guess I'd finally wound up a delinquent.

I felt ill at ease at school at the best of times, but now that I'd skipped class, the thought of people's watching eyes set me more on edge than normal. But come on. Anxiety was no reason to skip school, right? I had to go back to class, even if I felt like a wanted criminal the whole way there.

The classroom was deserted when I arrived. I breathed a blatant sight of relief. Had I bumped into Ajisai-san, I would have had to add another lie to the mix, something like, "Oh yeah, I'm not feeling all that great!"

"Ajisai-san," I mumbled to myself. I looked at her desk as I packed up my things to go home. "Why me, Ajisai-san?"

But I knew there was no point in ruminating on it. I mean, I'd

asked Mai a million times “Why me?” and even though she always responded, I had never once accepted her answers as fact. Unfortunately, I had the software bug where I wasn’t able to change my own settings by going, “Okay, no more thinking!” or something. I really wished humanity could hurry up and get that patched already.

I sighed and hoisted my backpack. “I’d better get home,” I told myself.

Then I left, fleeing the scene with my guilt in tow.

I was nervous that the school might have contacted my parents to inform them of my absence, but fortunately, my fears turned out to be ungrounded. I scarfed down my dinner without saying a word, and once I was finished eating, I hid in my room. My sister might have said something to me, but it all fell on deaf ears.

Screw taking a bath. I just crawled under the blankets. Even though I was exhausted, I had so many bad thoughts running through my head that I had a hard time falling asleep. I knew getting a good night’s rest would make everything look better, though, so I forced myself to close my eyes.

But when I woke up the next day, I didn’t feel better—far from it. Instead, it felt like everything had come to a head.

***

“Hey, Mom…” I said when I came into the living room in my pajamas. “I don’t feel so good today.”

“Oh, really?” she said. “Are you up to going to school?”

“Could I stay home for the day?” I mumbled, looking away. I couldn’t meet her eyes.

When I stole a peek at her, I saw a slight worry in her eyes, but she still smiled at me like everything was A-okay.

“I suppose,” she said. “You’ve really been giving high school your best effort. All right, yes, you may. But don’t spend the whole day playing video games, you hear? Make sure you get some good rest.”

“Yeah, I know…” I nodded slightly and then trudged back to my

bedroom.

My sister passed me on the way and tilted her head. “Wait, are you not going to school today, Oneechan?” she asked.

I didn’t say anything and instead went back to my room.

Behind me, I could hear my mom and sister talking.

“Hey, is Oneechan going through another one of her truancy phases?” my sister asked.

My heart immediately lurched, and I gritted my teeth. I really didn’t feel all that well, I swear! But I couldn’t yell that at her now, so I just went to my room and got back into my still-warm bed. I almost reached out for my phone before I drew my hand back. Sure, people might have sent me messages, but I felt so awkward about skipping class yesterday that I didn’t want to so much as peep at the screen.

As I lay there in bed, all the sounds from the other side of the door washed over me: the front door opening, my little sister calling, “Heading out now!”, my dad leaving for work, and my mom going about her household chores.

“Ah…” I groaned.

It felt like I’d been unwinding a ball of thread as I carefully tiptoed through a labyrinth, but my string had snapped somewhere along the way, and now I didn’t know where to go next. *Nah, that’s not right,* a voice inside me bluffed. *I’m just tired. I’ll take the day off today and then be as right as rain tomorrow. Just you wait. I’ll be back in school with a smile on my face.*

I was just making a mountain out of a molehill. Sure, I trembled with anxiety over the thought of what people might say to me, but let’s be real. No one cared that I skipped class, and besides, I really did feel sick today. Like my mom said, I was just tired from working so hard all the time. I’d be back on my feet tomorrow. Yeah. Right.

“Yeah,” I repeated out loud.

The curtain blocked the sunlight from coming into my room, but I put the blanket over my head anyway. The thing was, I knew what was up. Back when I stopped going to school in junior high, it’d all started out like this: a single day of ditching, aka me not wanting to go to school because I felt awkward for some reason or another. Then it’d just kept dragging itself out.

I must have fallen asleep at some point, and when I woke up, it was already evening outside. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and got up from bed.

"I feel like a zombie," I said.

I hadn't even dreamed.

It always seems like there's a million things going on in a school day, so how come that same time passes by in the blink of an eye when you're resting at home? I think that must be what they call the theory of relativity. (Maybe?)

At any rate, I washed my face, had a shower, and then waited at the dining table for dinner in a daze. Without my phone, I had nothing better to do than watch the evening educational specials on TV. All the young boys and girls with such bright futures ahead of them looked like they were having the times of their lives. I wondered if any of them would still be on TV next year or the year after that… Great, see how naturally I went down those depressing rabbit holes?

My mom kept trying to talk to me.

"How are you feeling?" she'd say.

Or, "Do you think you'll be up for going to school tomorrow?"

Or even, "Maybe you should go see a doctor."

I kept giving her non-committal responses.

Then my sister came home. "I'm back!" she called. "Whoa, you look like a corpse."

When I didn't say anything back, my sister harrumphed and then went to her room. I guess I really should have stayed in my room until it was time for dinner. Being around my sister and her cheery attitude forced me to think about everyone from Ashigaya.

She came back from her room after having changed out of her uniform and sat down at the table, messing around on her phone.

"Hey, Oneechan," she said.

"…What now?"

"Hmm… Oh, never mind. It's nothing. I was just surprised at how ugly you look when you frown like that."

“Excuse me?” I glared at her.

I was sick right now, okay? What did I do to deserve this treatment?

Still with that rotten attitude of hers, my sister switched the topic. “Oh, by the way,” she said, “do you remember the girls who came over during summer break? For some reason, they said they wanted to take a look at your baby pictures. Where do you think they’re at? Dad’s room?”

“What the heck?” I said. “Absolutely no.”

“Nah, nah, nah, I’m sure I can hunt down *one* where you look halfway decent. It doesn’t matter if it’s a really old one from back when you were in preschool or when you were an infant or something.”

“I said, *no*!” I smacked the table with my hand, producing a louder, more ringing bang than I had expected. In the subsequent silence, the bright, peppy voices on the living room TV stood out especially loud.

My sister glared at me with cold eyes, not in the least bit cowed. My blood felt like it was turning to ice.

“That was way too loud,” she said. “If you don’t want me to look, then just say so. Don’t go slapping the table.”

“…Okay.”

I pulled my hand back, but I couldn’t even apologize. The best I could do was brush past my mom when she came in to see what all the ruckus was about.

If my sister hadn’t brought up the album thing that day, I doubt I would ever have noticed. Maybe, if not for that, it would have taken me years to reintegrate into society. Still, I didn’t want to chalk it all up to my sister!

I went to head her off at the pass and got my album out of my dad’s room, whereupon I threw it open on my desk. I sat in my desk chair, hugging my knees to myself as I flipped through it.

“But I’m always telling her I don’t want her to look, right?” I said to myself. “Haruna’s just being insensitive, that’s all.” I continued to reargue the point with her in my head in a completely worthless use of

my time. “How come it’s so simple for her to steamroller my boundaries like that? I wish she would quit it. She should just leave me alone. It’s not like she cares about me.”

Ugh.

I took a photo out of my desk drawer, the one that’d been taken of all three of us in that photography studio over summer vacation. Ajisai-san had given it to me. In the photograph, my smile was awkward, but I seemed happy enough with both Mai and Ajisai-san standing next to me. We squeezed in together like we’d all been best friends for years. I wished that the three of us could have stayed like that forever, never changing. But both Mai and Ajisai-san were strong, so I knew that no matter how much they changed, they could still accept themselves. I, in all my cowardice, was the only one who couldn’t change. I was still stuck in that summer day, and now I was left behind in the dust.

I rubbed my fingers over the photo. Their tips prickled with heat.

Just then, there was a knock on the door.

“I’m coming in, Oneechan,” my sister said.

“Wait, huh?!”

I scrambled to shove the photograph underneath the album as my sister barged in like a home invader.

“Don’t just march in here!” I screamed. “Do you really think you’re welcome after what just happened? Do you have the memory of a goldfish or what?”

“Whatever,” she said. “The album wasn’t in Dad’s room, so I figured you must have walked off with it.”

I clutched the album to my chest like it was my own baby. “I already told you no! How many times do I have to keep saying that?”

“Come on, but you have to look decent in some of them, right? You’re only saying no because you don’t want anyone to see how weird and depressed you are. Here, let me try looking for one.”

“No, they all suck!” I insisted. “I’ve sucked from the minute I was born!”

My sister’s voice dropped. *“Really?”* she said, her voice dripping with disgust. Eeep. “I thought you only sucked in junior high.”

“Don’t insult me!” I snapped.

“But you said it yourself…” Haruna snatched the album from my hands. “Here,” she said. “Enough whining. Let me have it.”

“Hey!” I knew that if we were really going to fight for it, she’d overpower me easily, so I clung pitifully to her sleeve. “L-listen, I have to sign off on it first… If you can’t find a good photo, then give up… That’s my one condition… If you don’t agree to that, then I’ll light this whole album on fire right now.”

“Are you really that upset about it?” she asked. “Fine, fine, whatever you say.”

Haruna sat down on my bed and flipped through the album. Most of the Amaori family photos were from that period when my dad was totally gaga over his camera. Beyond that, the rest were various pictures of our friends and whatnot, from the times when Haruna and I had borrowed the camera before we had phones of our own.

“Oh, how about this one?” my sister suggested.

“No!” I cried. “I look stupid in that one!”

“Okay, then how’s this one?”

“I have such a weird haircut there!”

“You’re so picky,” she sighed.

“Nuh-uh,” I insisted. “You’re just being evil, the way you pick these out.”

I flipped through the album with bloodshot eyes. Were there really no good ones? Not even one? Was there really no photograph where I looked like the prime example of a normal, extroverted person? Not one shot where, by a miracle, I looked picture-perfect?

“Hey, Oneechan,” my sister said.

“What?!” I demanded.

“You skipped school today, didn’t you?”

“Huh?” I whipped my head up like a jack-in-the-box. “Oh, me? Nah, I-I just—my stomach wasn’t feeling too great, so I figured I’d stay home. Better safe than sorry, you know. That’s all it was.”

My sister gave me a Look that told me she’d seen through my barefaced lie. Gah. Why, oh why, was I so easy to read?

“I don’t care what happened,” she said. “You can skip all the

school you want. It won't affect me in any way, shape, or form, so you can do absolutely *whatever* you want."

Hey, that was going too far!

"But I have to say," she went on, "as surprising as it is, you having so many outgoing friends is bringing me some perks too."

"…What're you going on about?"

I peered at Haruna. From the blank look on her face, I couldn't tell what sort of emotional tone she was going for. No fair; she was my sister, for crying out loud. *Come on, show some emotion on your face already!*

"I didn't turn my life around in high school for your sake, you know," I told her.

"Yeah, I get that, but I was the one who guided you through all that training, remember? Can't I at least get a little something in return? You know, like getting a leg up in life. That kind of thing."

"…I mean, I guess," I relented. I had to admit she had given me a lot of help.

"I took you to the beauty parlor when you couldn't go on your own and you were too embarrassed to go with Mom. And then I picked out all your clothes and makeup for you. I mean, looking back on it now, I have to say—wow, asking your little sister for help? I was barely out of elementary and everything."

"Yeah, fair." And there were plenty of other little examples too. The whole reason Haruna was always getting on my case for everything was because I'd asked her to tell me whenever I went out of line. Thanks to her, I'd learned to talk slower and fixed my habit of rambling on forever about topics the other person had zero interest in, so it wasn't all bad. As embarrassing as it was to admit, I really did feel grateful to her (more or less) for all the handholding she'd done in this process. But the thing I was most grateful for was—

"So, I mean," my sister went on, "if you become a shut-in again, that'd be a loss on my end, you know? I sunk a lot of time into you as an investment. That's why you'd better go back to school tomorrow, you hear?"

"I-I swear I wasn't trying to ditch!" I insisted. "And I'll go back once I feel better! I was planning on going to school tomorrow

anyway."

Then, for some reason, my sister picked up my phone.

"Hey, give it back!" I cried. I'd left it unlocked!

"Holy cow," she said. "You have a gazillion messages. See, Mai-senpai and Ajisai-senpai are worried about you. Here, I'll tell them not to be concerned since you'll be back tomorrow."

"Excuse you! Who gave you the right? Hey, stop!"

She tossed my phone back, but when I looked at it, it was too late. Oh my god. She had seriously already replied to them.

"This is really crossing a line," I told her. "On LINE, no less."

"You could at least try to be a little grateful," she said. "I mean, I did you a favor by doing something you couldn't manage yourself."

"And now you're acting like I owe you for it? You're freaky is what you are. Who raised you?"

Mai, Ajisai-san, and even Kaho-chan had messaged me checking in. I started getting all emotional just looking at my classmates' names. God, they really were so nice. I wished I could return the favor, but I just couldn't pull it off. Still, that sentiment…was real.

"And with this," Haruna said, putting her hands on her hips smugly, "you have no choice but to go back to school tomorrow."

I'm not sure such smugness was warranted when she'd driven me into a corner, but whatever.

"You're freaking harsh," I told her.

"Nah, not at all. I'm way tougher on the kouhais in my club; this is me being nice. But I mean, you can handle it, right? We're built from the same stuff, after all."

This girl never gave me a break. She pushed me into situations where all my paths of retreat were blocked and I had no way to go but forward. She drove me to such desperation that I felt like I had no other choice but to bite the bullet and do the thing. I would never say it, mind you, but *that's* the thing I was most grateful to her for. But still, it wouldn't have killed her to have been a bit nicer to me!

"Oh, this is a good one!" she said.

Having been left to her own devices, Haruna had just graduated

from home invader to plunderer. She'd spotted the photo I'd hidden under the album earlier—the one of Mai, Ajisai-san, and me on summer break—and picked it up off the desk.

"Hey, no…" I said. That wasn't a baby picture.

I started to reach for it but then changed my mind.

"You know what? Sure," I said. "You can use that one, but be careful with it."

I felt like I wouldn't mind if my sister took it. It was far too pretty to stay in my own possession, after all.

"Thanks, Oneechan!" she said, in her animated, sporty way. Then she dashed out, leaving only the thank-you behind her. Now that her task was done, she didn't want to hang around. Time passed faster for her than for ol' hooky-playing me. That freaking girl, I'm telling you.

Anyway, I sat back down on my bed and idly reached out for the album. I went back to the beginning and started looking at all the pages I'd riffled through earlier during my tussle with Haruna.

Man, I missed those days. I guess I'd been a decently outgoing kid back in elementary school. There were a lot of photos of the girls who were my friends at the time, among them some of the girls who'd made me want to turn my life around in the first place and others whose names I could only vaguely remember. I wondered if they, like me, also had a lot of worries on their plate now. I wondered if every day was a struggle for them too. Boy, I really wished I could chat with them again. I'd have loved to reminisce over all of those happy memories. Maybe that was just an excuse to run away from the here and now, but it was my past which brought me to the here and now. There wasn't anything wrong with reflecting on it from time to time, right?

I wondered if I had a way to get in touch with any of these girls, hopefully some who wouldn't find it too weird that I was only contacting them in high school. Or maybe some who'd be nice to me and be good for my self-esteem. Ah, that was Amaori Repugnantko talking again.

Just then, my eyes stopped. "Wait, who's that?"

There was a girl facing the camera and giving it a shy peace sign. This was from one of the times when I'd brought my camera along with me to the cram school I attended back then. She was kind of hunched

over and wore glasses. I remembered that she was really good-natured, sweet, and got super excited talking with me about our favorite manga and anime. Those were really fun times. We were always together in cram school, and it never once crossed my mind whether other people liked or disliked me back then. Those halcyon days flew by in the blink of an eye.

"I wish I could fall asleep tonight and wake up in elementary school again," I murmured to myself. Then I could have fun at school and go to cram school to talk with that girl about manga again. I remembered that we used to laugh so much we'd make our stomachs hurt, and the teachers would have to tell us, "Get serious now!" We'd only pretend to feel sorry and stick our tongues out once their backs were turned.

As I stared blankly at the photo, chasing the memories of the past which would never return, I suddenly felt an uncanny sense of déjà vu. Wait a second. Was it just me, or did she look familiar? Well, no shit, Sherlock, I'd taken a photo of her, so she *had* to have been familiar. But that's not what I'm talking about. I felt like I'd seen her somewhere else.

A message popped up on my phone as I scrutinized the photo. "Hmm?" I said. The name on the screen was…

okey dokey, Rena-chin!!! read the message. *ill be waiting! cya soon!*

Wait, no way.

"What the heck?" I told myself.

Because yeah, if I remembered correctly, the name of the girl at my cram school was…Minaguchi Kaho. Which, weirdly enough, meant she shared the exact same name as my high school friend Koyanagi Kaho.

Chapter 1:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Be Buddy-Buddy with Kaho-chan!

ONE HUNDRED PERCENT without a doubt, books were the largest influential factor in me becoming such a big video game fan. I loved reading as a kid. Back in elementary school, I was one of those kids who practically lived in the library. Above all, books with illustrations were the bomb. I ate up every kids' book and light novel I could get my hands on. Looking back on it, I guess most of those were fantasy. Then, once I started getting into fantasy games, I eventually got hooked on gaming, and from there, it was a hop, skip, and a jump to where I was now: addicted to playing FPSes and fighting games.

Anyway, returning to the topic at hand, back then, Minaguchi-san was my closest friend. She and I could talk about manga for ages, even if no one at school was into it—which characters we liked best, what scenes were coolest, you name it. Or we'd sometimes each read the same manga magazine and speculate over what would happen in the next chapter. Come to think of it, she was really the only person I'd met in my whole sixteen years of life who I could talk about my interests with. She'd been just as introverted as I was, so I hadn't felt nervous talking to her at all.

I was originally supposed to go to cram school as just a summer thing, but I'd wanted to see her so badly that I carried on with it for a whole half a year. We'd been really, really good friends.

So…was *that* Minaguchi-san Kaho-chan? Did coincidences like this even happen?

I timidly tiptoed into class, doing my best to remain inconspicuous with a little, "H-hi, everybody…"

But there were so few people there at that point that I attracted attention whether I wanted it or not. *Eeep!* People were staring at me!

But then two girls walked up to me and blocked those staring eyes like a partitioning screen. They were Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san, the

two who always came as a pair.

“Good morning, Amaori-san!” Hasegawa-san said.

“I was so worried when you weren’t here yesterday,” said Hirano-san. “Were you doing okay?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

I was so glad they’d come up to talk to me that I almost started to emit a disgusting little chuckle. I hurried to beam at them instead.

“Thanks, guys,” I said. “I’m feeling a lot better now.”

“Are you sure?” said Hasegawa-san. “Fall’s almost here, you know. It’s easy to fall sick at this time of year.”

“But class is only half as exciting without you around,” Hirano-san added, “so I’m glad you’re feeling better!”

“Half as exciting?” I said. “Come on, don’t exaggerate. I’m sure it’s still two-thirds at least.”

The other girls giggled. Perfect. I could still act the part of a pretty, lovable popular girl. Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san flattered me so much I was losing my fear of other people staring at me. *Thanks, guys.*

“Oh, hiya, Rena-chin!” I heard someone call, and then a huge weight glommed onto me from behind. Gah!

I pitched forward and turned my head over my shoulder to look right into a pretty girl’s face that smelled of bracing citrus. She was hugging the life out of me!

“H-hi, Kaho-chan,” I said.

“That’s me!”

Her pure white smile was radiant enough to power up anyone who saw it. After spending a day without being around her, it hit me all over again that this was the real dazzling power of a beautiful girl. I tried my best to put up with how much it messed with me. If I got this freaked out every time Kaho-chan touched me, then I’d never be able to handle my everyday life.

Hasegawa-san put her hands to her mouth and cooed. “Oh my god, a quintet interaction! Right in front of my eyes!”

“Say what now?” I said.

“Oh, I can’t stand being in the same space with such a high concentration of beautiful girls! Take care, Amaori-san and Koyanagi-san. Long life and happiness to both of you!”

Hands flapping the whole while, Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san scuttled away.

Kaho-chan waved them goodbye. “See ya!” she called.

Well, it looked like my time to relax was over. As Kaho-chan clung to me like a backpack, I whispered to her, “Hey, what’s that quintet thing about?”

“Oh, that’s what people’re calling us these days, y’know?”

I pulled out my phone and googled it. A quintet’s the continuation of the duo, trio, quartet pattern, apparently, so it meant a group of five people.

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard that word,” I said. “I guess it’s because there’s five people in our friend group, right?”

“Yeah, and you know that Mai-Mai works for Queen Rose, uh-huh?”

“Yeah, and? Oh, wait. I think I get it.” Yeah, it was spelled “quintet,” but I guess you could get “queentet” out of that if you tried. Jeez, talk about a stretch.

Kaho-chan popped off my back and held a peace sign up to eye level. “Now you gotta introduce yourself by going, ‘Heeey, I’m the quintet’s one and only Amaori Renako! Quintalicious!’”

“I’m really not sure if I’d count,” I said. The thought of her assigning me to something so out of my league filled me with horror.

Kaho-chan giggled. “Y’know, I bet there’s at least one or two peeps out there who’d stab you to free up a seat in the quintet, don’tcha think?”

I hugged myself. “Jeez, calm down, Machiavelli.”

More and more people started to arrive as Kaho-chan and I talked at the back of the classroom.

“Oh, Rena-chan!” Ajisai-san called. “Hey there.”

“Good morning, Amaori,” Satsuki-san said.

“Oh hey, Ajisai-san and Satsuki-san,” I responded. “Ah, and hello

to you too, Oduka-san."

"Why, hello, Renako," said Mai.

And now the aforementioned quintet was assembled. I could hear people oohing and ahhing somewhere off in the distance. Maybe our reputation had grown since summer break, because now even people from other grades were coming to see us. The sheer power of my friends alarmed me, and I took a step back.

Ajisai-san clapped her hands with a grin. "You know, it feels like forever since the whole gang's been back together. Isn't this fun?"

I could feel the question mark directed at me. It was a considerate question mark, meant to usher me back into the fold in the wake of my difficulty in reintegrating with the group after the end of break.

"Y-yeah, for real," I said with a nod.

I only happened to notice it this time around, but I guess Ajisai-san was always benevolently looking out for me like this. Honestly, it wouldn't be long before this angel ascended to goddesshood.

"Amaori, you should copy Sena's notes later," said Satsuki-san.

"Yeah, you should," agreed Ajisai-san. "Oh, but we don't have literature today, so I didn't bring my lit notebook."

"Here, you can have mine!" Kaho-chan piped up. "'Cause I didn't bother taking it home!"

"That's nothing to be proud of, Kaho," Satsuki-san told her.

I laughed. "Thanks, guys. You too, Satsuki-san."

I put my hands together in prayer seeing my friends work so hard for me. They really were so nice. None of them treated me like some kind of abscess because I'd been absent. My fears, then, were clearly an example of me being far too self-conscious.

However, among all of them, only Mai was silent and seemed a little off. Well, I suppose it was only to be expected. I'd skipped class right after she and I talked on the roof, so that could have worried her. And since that obviously *was* the reason why I ditched, I couldn't try to cheer her up by being like, "Don't worry about it! It's NBD, Mai!" That left an uncomfortable prickling feeling somewhere in my chest.

"Here, want to take a look at my notes before class starts?" Ajisai-san asked.

“Oh, right. Thanks,” I said.

We all used that as the cue for us to go back to our desks.

Oh yeah. Come to think of it, while I might have recovered a bit of my MP (mental points) during my absence, in the end, I hadn’t done anything to solve my underlying problems. I knew I needed to do something about them soon, and yet…I don’t know, man…

Still, worrying about it too much would use up my MP too. Honestly, the issue I had was that I really didn’t have enough life experience or social skills to contend with this. So if I wanted to do something about it, my two options were either to fully heal up and then charge into a do-or-die boss fight, or else grind for social skills and level up. Since I didn’t have enough time for the latter option, that meant I had to choose the former.

Well, at the very least, I needed to get my mental health under control. If I didn’t, I was just going to end up playing hooky again like I had the day before. My sister had nipped my ditching in the bud on day one, but it’d be no shock if I stayed absent for multiple days the next time this happened. I may not have believed in myself, but I sure did believe in my own patheticness!

All right, then. *Time to bite the bullet.*

“Hey, you know what, Kaho-chan?” I said when she came over to bring me her literature notebook.

“Yeah? What’s shakin’, bacon?”

I hesitated. “Uh…”

Kaho-chan tilted her head quizzically.

So, if Kaho-chan actually was the Minaguchi-san I knew, then that meant, say, if she became my close friend again and gave me advice, then I could stand a chance at facing the challenges that were too daunting for me to handle alone. Gathering party members was the staple of RPGs, after all. *Yeah, nice excuse, me!*

But I mean, we didn’t have to talk about deep stuff either. It’d be nice enough just to talk about old times, and above all else, the thought of being close buds with Kaho-chan made me happy. Plus, she had no idea what I was like in junior high, you know? *Yup, the excuses keep piling on.*

Still, excuses or not, I looked right at Kaho-chan. I thought I could

see a similarity in her facial features, but…the girl back in elementary school had been way shyer. If nothing else, I couldn't picture her being so aware of her own cuteness that she'd tilt her head to one side and go, "Yeah, what's shakin', bacon?" Minaguchi-san didn't bear even the faintest resemblance to Kaho-chan, the biggest extrovert who ever lived.

What should I do? Yolo it? I mean, if they turned out to be different people after all, all I had to do was apologize. Right. What did I have to lose? (Apart from a night in bed writhing in awkward agony.)

"So, uh," I began. "I don't think I can talk about it here, but… Uh. Could we chat at lunch?"

"Sure, but like, what's the big deal?" Kaho-chan gave me a curious look and then started to hound me for answers. "Ooh, what is it? Are you gonna ask me out?" She leered at me.

Ajisai-san whipped around with a shriek of "Huh?!"

It'd be truly rotten for me to ask out Kaho-chan when both Mai and Ajisai-san had asked me out already. Believe me, I most certainly was *not* going to!

At lunch, Kaho-chan met me behind the school building.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Why'd you ask me to come out here? Wait, are you legit asking me out?" She put her hands on her cheeks and blushed.

"I said no!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Great, now I was getting too embarrassed to spit it out! Kaho-chan was the only person in our whole friend group I didn't feel anxious talking to. She always took the initiative to be the dork or the butt of everyone's jokes, and I felt like she was really good at getting people to fall in step with her. To put it another way, it was easy for me to figure out the right thing to say when I was talking to her. It was kind of like there was a standard routine for how to chat with her, like we were following a script for a comedy routine. As a result, I realized just now that going off script with her made me super anxious. Urgh. Still, I was the one who was taking up Kaho-chan's precious time, which meant I had no choice but to come out and ask.

"U-uh, hey, Kaho-chan. You see this?" I pulled the photo from my pocket and showed it to her. "This is you, right?"

Kaho-chan was silent. There was a smile on her face, but something was off about it. It almost looked like she was wearing a mask.

Wait, hold on! Before my bewildered eyes, Kaho-chan stooped and picked up a rock off the ground.

"Hey, Rena-chin, d'you know what mankind's oldest weapon is?" she asked.

Uh, hello?!

"The rocks all over the ground," Kaho-chan continued. "By throwing enough stones, we've managed to take down fierce animals much, much larger than we are."

"Y-you good, Kaho-chan…?"

Step by step, Kaho-chan drew forward. She looked a good two or three times her normal size with the weight of human history on her back.

"So you're finally threatening me, hmm, Rena-chin? Then it's time to fight back with the wisdom of all mankind on my side. You'll never see the light of day again."

"W-wait, it's not like that!" I protested.

"No more arguments!" she insisted. "You're done for!"

Kaho-chan was attacking me! I know I said I wanted to level up to defeat the boss, but this wasn't what I meant!

I grabbed the wrist of her raised arm and desperately tried to resist her. Kaho-chan pushed me over, and I fell to the ground on my back. She straddled me. Aaaah! I was being hunted!

"It's really not like that, I swear!" I screamed for all I was worth. It was time to resort to the most primal wisdom of mankind: language! "I was just! Trying! To find the girl in the photo so I could talk to her!" I howled.

Kaho-chan froze in place.

"Because I've been having such a hard time of things lately," I went on. "And then I happened to open up an old photo album and saw that picture. I just, well, I just thought it'd be nice to talk with the girl in the photo again. I swear, that's really all it was."

Kaho-chan stared down at me for a long while. "You promise?"

“Y-yeah, I promise!” I had no idea how much she believed me, so I prattled on for dear life. “And I’m sorry. Yeah, I guess it’s not very nice to bring up the past, huh? I went and overstepped your boundaries because I was only thinking about myself. I’m sorry. I really am.”

I mean, if someone had suddenly exposed me as an introverted loser, I would be plotting a perfect crime too. I didn’t know this was such a sensitive topic for her or anyone else, but it was still really stupid of me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I won’t bring it up again, I swear. And of course I won’t breathe a word of it to anyone else. Please, Kaho-chan, just forget about it.”

Kaho-chan let out a tiny sigh. Then she tossed her rock aside and got up off of me. Was…I safe?

She slapped the dirt off her palms and then extended a hand to me where I lay on the ground. “You ’n me have *a lot* to talk about,” she said.

“K-Kaho-chan…?”

The corners of her mouth turned up in a grin, and she looked more grown up as she smiled. “How ’bout after school today?”

“Oh, Kaho-chan!” I grabbed her hand hard. “Yeah, sure thing!”

Ancient human wisdom could get the better of ancient human weaponry. I felt like I’d vicariously experienced all mankind’s history of wars and reconciliations. I’d just made history myself. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure what had just happened, mind you, but that seemed like a good explanation.

So, to make up for three years’ worth of lost time, Kaho-chan and I set out after school for a nearby diner.

She and I sat down across from each other at one of the tables. I stared idly at her as I ruminated. Looking back on it, I’d always been one of those kids who couldn’t look people straight in the face when we talked. That must have been why I hadn’t recognized Kaho-chan right off the bat. Suddenly, I started feeling kind of guilty about that.

“Nah, no biggie,” she said. “But I gotta say, I was hecka surprised you forgot about me.”

“I-I’m sorry,” I said. This was entirely my fault, so I had no choice but to layer on the apologies. “But I mean, Kaho-chan, you seemed like a whole different person back then. You know, with the glasses and all. I had no idea you wear contacts.”

“What is this, some kind of corny manga?” she teased, chomping on a french fry.

“I mean, the Minaguchi-san I remember was more. Well. You know.”

“Meek ’n mousy ’n a glasses geek?” Kaho-chan offered.

“Uh! I was going to say well-mannered and quiet!”

Kaho-chan laughed. She had a point, but when Minaguchi-san talked about the things she loved, her eyes used to light up behind her glasses. I had loved seeing that.

“Yeah, and I guess I, like, changed my last name and all,” she said.

“Oh, yeah. Uh. Yeah, that sure is. A thing.”

I nodded jerkily, but Kaho-chan waved my concern away with a “NBD” kind of gesture. Her parents divorced and her dad remarried, she told me, but that’s all it was.

“Oh!” I said, in a very unhelpful response.

Kaho-chan snickered. “Bee-tee-dubs, I totally knew who you were from the moment I first saw you.”

“Urgh…! I-I’m sorry. But if you knew, you should have said something!”

“I mean, it’d be kinda hard for me to bring it up when you’d completely forgotten about me, yanno?”

Well, she did make a fair point.

“At any rate, I just figured, like, if you didn’t recognize me, who cares?” she said. “We’re in the same friend group and all, so we’d reconnect, y’feel me? I just didn’t expect you to finally notice halfway through the school year.”

“My deepest apologies…” But come on! I mean, really! I hung my head and forced myself to say, “But Kaho-chan, you’re just so…well… you’re so cute now…”

“Hmmm… Y-you think, huh? Well, then I guess it makes sense.”

Kaho-chan cleared her throat a couple of times.

Great, now I was worried she didn't believe me. I might have given off a bad impression if she thought I was just paying her empty compliments, so I kept going.

"You're super, super cute, Kaho-chan. It's not just that you've got good features; you're totally radiant. You're like an idol. Your skin and clothes and accessories are all amazing, and you're so fashionable. You know exactly what to wear, you're so good at conversation, and you have such a cute voice too."

"Wh-whoa, time out, bestie!" Kaho-chan interjected. She blushed slightly.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hog the conversation," I said.

"Nah, that's like whatever, but I mean…" Kaho-chan cleared her throat again. She looked away from me, almost like she was hiding her own embarrassment, and muttered, "I mean, I'm only cosplaying a popular girl."

"What was that?" I asked.

"Nothing, nothing!" Kaho-chan swerved to switch topics. "Hey, Rena-chin, didja know that you, like, haven't changed one bit?"

"Huh?!" I cried. "I-is that really true?"

I instinctively put a hand to my chest. Kaho-chan had metamorphosed into a lovely butterfly, but I hadn't changed since elementary? That came as a bit of a shock. No, scratch the bit part—that was horribly shocking.

Kaho-chan smiled at me and said, "Yeah, 'cause even back then, you always told me how you were the center of class, 'member?"

I about died on the spot before forcing myself to laugh. "Wow, did I really say that?"

"Uh-huh. You got all the boys and girls together and taught 'em a whole buncha new games. Your school always sounded like so much fun, and I remember wishing I could go there too."

Um, what?! Was she making fun of me? No, she legit believed it! She dead-ass thought I was an actual extrovert! Happiness and despair assaulted me by turns.

"Ah, yeah, that brings me back!" I said.

I'm sure I don't have to tell you, but everything that Kaho-chan was talking about was all nonsense I'd made up. The me of the past was hunting current me down with the grim reaper's scythe in her hands. Now it was too late to go back. But wow, okay. Did that mean Kaho-chan really thought I was popular? *Hey, Satsuki-san, get a load of this,* I thought. *I can totally pull off being a popular girl. You're just too perceptive, so there.* I mean, I don't think it was just Kaho-chan's awful eyesight to blame!

I vowed then and there to never, ever tell the truth to Kaho-chan, if no one else. It was for my sake more than anything.

She looked almost sad as she asked me, "Hey, Rena-chin, did you grow out of manga and anime and stuff?"

"Nah, no way!" I listed off the handful of manga titles I still follow to this day. Most of my allowance went into buying video games these days, so the majority of my manga reading was on manga apps. But even if I'd stopped watching anime, there was no way I could quit manga cold turkey.

"But I mean, you're not into that stuff at all anymore, right?" I asked.

"Huh, why would you think that?"

"Well, you know…" Because now she was so social and had so many friends… I was about to say that but then shut my mouth. I was probably just being biased, you know? Plus, even Ajisai-san watched magical girl anime.

Kaho-chan grinned. "I'm, like, so totally into manga and stuff. I love it! Okay, let me be real—I think I'm a way bigger fan than I used to be!" Her eyes glittered with the same light they once had before. "So, whatcha into right now?"

"Uh, so for the stuff that's out right now…"

For a good while we digressed from our reminiscing about old times and got super into talking about various pieces of media. It was a conversation I normally never got to have: I love that one scene. This character's my favorite. That line was so cool. We took turns trading comments, relating with one another the whole time. We were having so much fun we lost track of time, and I kept feeling more and more mentally fulfilled by the moment. I couldn't remember having had such pure fun since summer vacation ended. Oh man, I was getting so

emotional over it that I almost felt like crying.

"Thank you, Kaho-chan," I said.

"Huh? What for?"

I sniffled back a tear. "I've been going through a lot recently, and it's wiped me out. I'm really, really glad we were able to reconnect."

"Oh, yeah, you mentioned that…" she said. "Uh, so, like, what's up?"

"It's a whole story…"

Kaho-chan patted her chest. "C'mon, hit me! We're buddies, right?" She lifted her index finger in the air like she was some sort of detective. "I know it's kinda cliché, but it makes you feel better to get stuff off your chest, you know? I know I'm not the real serious type for talking about deep stuff, but I used to be your best friend, right? So c'mon, lay it on me. It'll be in honor of our reunion."

"Oh, Kaho-chan…" I said. "But I mean, I dunno."

The reason why I was so reluctant, naturally, was because Kaho-chan had a crush on Mai. I was sure she'd be pissed when she heard that Mai had gone and asked me out.

But when I wouldn't talk, Kaho-chan looked at me in scorn. "Fine, whatever, I guess," she said. "We're both in high school now. We're totally different from how we used to be, right? Whatever. It sucks, but I guess them's the breaks."

"N-no, that's not what I meant," I said, waving my hands in protest.

Kaho-chan propped an arm up on the table and rested her chin in her hand in a total sulk. Oh god, what now?

"I just think you might end up wishing you hadn't offered to hear me out," I told her.

"Yeah, but I'm the only one who can decide that, y'know?" she said.

Well, true! And by the time I realized what I was doing, I was opening up to her.

"Uh, well," I began. "See, this summer. Um. Ajisai-san asked me out!"

"…Huh?" Kaho-chan said.

"But that's not all. To be real with you, before all that, Mai asked me out too."

"…Say what now?"

I hid my face in my hands. "But how do they expect me to choose either of them? I mean, it'd be a total waste for them to end up with the likes of me. I'm just common and plain, and I barely leave an impression on anybody. They're both way out of my league."

For a while there, Kaho-chan said nothing and just sat in place trembling. Was she disgusted with me and my indecisiveness?

"Wha… Wha…" She reminded me of a volcano moments before eruption.

"Yeah…?" I prompted.

And then, seconds later, she went:

"What the *heck*?!"

Kaho-chan dragged me out of the diner, led me to a nearby riverbank, and threw me to the ground with a smack. Why on earth was I being shoved to the ground twice in a single day?!

"Wh-what the heck, Kaho-chan?" I cried. "Have you lost your mind?"

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, Kaho-chan hefted a rock the size of her first. "Say, Rena-chin, do you know of this thing we call a rock? From time immemorial—"

"Enough of that already!"

The dog walkers and other passersby kept stopping and staring at our teenage weirdness. I scrambled to my feet and looked Kaho-chan dead-on. Backlit by the sun as she was, I couldn't see all that well what sort of face she was making.

"Y'know," she said, sidling up to me, "it's not too late. You can still tell me everything you just said was a lie, and I'll letcha off the hook."

She terrified me!

"But I shouldn't even be on the hook to begin with," I said. "And besides, it's all true! I only opened up in the first place because you said I could tell you anything."

"Oh, don't give me that crap!" she snarled. Kaho-chan bore down on me and yanked me forward by the collar. *Eep!* "What, you wanna brag just 'cause you remembered me? Is that what you're tryna say? 'Oh nooooo, I'm just too populaaaaaar, woe is meeee!' Is that it?! You were born with a social silver spoon in your mouth, and you know it!"

"N-no!" I insisted.

"You think we live in two separate worlds, huh? 'Cause you're the big cheese, is that it?! Now listen here, bub—I've never been so insulted in my life!"

I trembled at her wrath. I couldn't recall anyone ever being so angry at me before. Now that I'd made Kaho-chan blow her lid, I was rooted to the spot with horror.

But even so, I couldn't sit there silently. "Y-you can't really think I'm bragging about being popular!" I shoved her away. "Believe me, I could not be more of a hater for people who do that. I'm legit having a

crisis about this!"

"Oh sure, I just *bet* you are," she sneered. "Having a crisis over what to choose, more like! You have both chocolate cake and shortcake for dessert, and you can't make up your mind, huh? And meanwhile, what do I get, sugar water? Is that it?!"

"I mean, it's not like I have a choice in the matter! *They* were the ones who went and caught feelings."

Cicadas hummed loudly around us, a lingering sound of summer. Not to be outdone by them, I raised my voice and screamed the worst possible things, the things I really felt that I couldn't say to anyone else. "Ajisai-san and Mai both said they have crushes on me. Believe me, I have no idea why either. It makes *zero* sense to me. I'm the last person to understand why they would feel this way! I mean, *I* would never want to date me, and I keep telling them that. That's why this bothers me so much! I just…don't want to hurt them."

I looked down and balled my hands into fists as I bit my trembling lip. I couldn't stop the tears from falling from my eyes.

"Oh, Rena-chin," Kaho-chan said. Her voice sounded gentler now.

I looked up at her with streaming eyes. "Kaho-cha—" I began to say.

But then fireworks exploded in front of my vision as Kaho-chan headbutted me. I fell to the ground clutching my forehead. Well, now I was crying for a whole different reason!

Kaho-chan squatted in front of me, mirroring my pose. She screamed, "Guess what? I don't give a frick!"

For a moment, I could once again do nothing but flap my mouth like a goldfish. "B-but how?" I finally said. "I mean, with everything I have going on…"

"Yeah, I heard you!" she said. "I heard everything, trust me! Eeeeverything. And I wish I was you for eeeeverything. What's your freaking problem? Just, like, pick one! Pick whichever one you like better!"

"But if I do, I'll make one of them sad," I protested.

"Then pick Aa-chan! That way, I'll be there to comfort Mai-Mai afterward. Boom, problem solved!"

“Um, I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about!” Kaho-chan snapped. “When it comes down to it, you just wanna show off how popular you are, don’t you? You little friggen-fraggen—”

“Whoa, wait, hold on a sec!”

She grappled with me and pushed me over again, and I landed on my butt with a smarting pain.

“You’ve always acted like you’re so special!” Kaho-chan screamed. “’Cause in the end, everyone loves you! Well, good for you, getting life on easy mode. Everything goes your way, and you don’t even have to lift a finger. God, I wish I was you!”

“Wha—none of that’s true!”

This time, I pushed Kaho-chan over, and now I was on top of her. I felt like I was having an actual fight, my first one ever.

“Everything most certainly does *not* go my way!” I snapped back at her. “But that hasn’t stopped me from working as hard as I can. That’s the only reason I even ended up as who I am today. You don’t know shit about me, okay?”

“Oh, I know plenty of shit! You’re always smiling for no reason, but you’re just trying to show everyone your good side so that no one’ll ever hate you. You’re freakin’ lame!”

I squeaked. My hand moved on instinct and raised itself to strike.

“What’s so bad about not wanting people to hate me, huh?” I yelled back. “I mean, I’ve never said a single word about wanting to date or anything, but that didn’t stop them from asking me out, now did it? All I want is for us to keep hanging out and having fun together!”

Kaho-chan squeezed her eyes shut, but I couldn’t bring my hand down to slap. Then she glared up at me from below. “…You’re freaking lame,” she said.

I didn’t say anything but just sat there, eyes downcast. Kaho-chan pushed me off of her like I was a piece of junk. Once she got to her feet, she turned her nose up at me and hmmphed. “Whatever,” she said. “I’m going home.”

Then she grabbed her bag and left. I sat there on the ground for a while even after she was gone. The evening breeze felt cool on my

burning body. Summer, I could feel, was at an end.

It startled my mom like nobody's business when I came home covered in mud. But even though my face was lined with tear streaks, I stuck to my story: I fell.

***

I didn't want to go to school the next day so badly that I would rather have died. It'd gone way past the point of being awkward, less crossing the line and more taking several running leaps across it. But if I stayed home, then it'd look like I'd accepted my defeat or, basically, given in to what Kaho-chan had said. And the thought of that was too frustrating to bear.

So I went to school even though I felt like I was dragging myself along the whole way. I was getting ready for class in a depressed funk when Kaho-chan barged in late.

"Hiya!" she called, all chipper. There was a huge bandage on her forehead, which our classmates grilled her about. But she just laughed off all their questions.

Man, I really, really couldn't see any sign of my old friend Minaguchi-san in her. If I had to guess, I figured it must have been a ton of work to make Kaho-chan, well, Kaho-chan. She'd changed her appearance and the whole way she talked. I mean, now she was worlds better at communicating than I was. Considering how long she'd labored to get on the straight and narrow, she'd probably just inadvertently snapped when I showed up, still wet behind the ears, and told her all that stuff about Mai and Ajisai-san.

Great. And just when I thought I'd made a friend I could talk to anything about.

Okay, but you know what? This was the one time I was *not* going to apologize. After all, this was all her fault! It was completely one-sided, and she knew jack about me. I mean, sure, I probably could have been more careful about my word choice, but still. *Ugh.* I spent the whole day stewing over this.

Kaho-chan and I wouldn't even look at each other over lunch as

we ate. Every so often, we'd both try to speak at the same time and then go "Hmmph!" and turn the other way.

Uh-huh. Given my will of steel, any reconciliation between us wasn't about to come from me, no ma'am. We weren't going to make up until I got an apology from her, and that was final. I refused to budge, not even when Ajisai-san tugged on my sleeve after lunch and worriedly asked, "R-Rena-chan, did something happen between you and Kaho-chan?"

I had a will of steel, baby! And I didn't give a frick about Kaho-chan either, so there!

But even though I thought that, what came out was, "Oh, uh, you know. It's a long story." Then I laughed it off.

Look, now it was time for *me* to be angry, Kaho-chan!

***

After several days of this, I decided after school to try and talk to Kaho-chan to get my MP back, but, if anything, the daily awkwardness had made my mental state sink even further down the drain. I felt like someone frantically attempting to pay back interest on a loan. At this rate, no matter how many times I rested at the inn, my MP would never recover in full.

Then, as I trudged over to the shoe lockers, I happened to walk right into an incredible scene, namely:

Kaho-chan screaming at the top of her lungs, "Fine, be that way! Frick you, Saa-chan!"

Kaho-chan wore her heart on her sleeve, but even when she was upset, it rarely felt like she actually meant it—that is, except for our recent tiff. And to be mad at Satsuki-san besides! I felt like I'd just witnessed a scandal, and I automatically hid in the corner of the hallway.

"Fine," Satsuki-san sniffed. "Then if we're done here, I'm leaving."

"You big cheapo!" Kaho-chan yelled after her.

“I hardly think that’s an appropriate thing for my employer to say.”

I peeked out of my hiding place and saw Kaho-chan and Satsuki-san squaring off in front of the shoe lockers. Even when facing a furious Kaho-chan, Satsuki-san was her usual unruffled self, probably thinking no more than, “Hmm, there’s a rather strong breeze today.” Classic Satsuki-san.

Wait, oh crap. Satsuki-san had just noticed me.

“Amaori,” she called.

I giggled awkwardly. “Hey there.”

Of all the places I did not want to be, in the middle of a fight between friends when I had no idea what was going on ranked right at the top of the list. Even as I stepped out, I wished with all my might to turn invisible on the spot.

As casually as if nothing had happened, Satsuki-san said, “I know. Why don’t you ask Amaori?”

“Whaaaat?!” Kaho-chan howled. (I felt like copying her.) I mean, Satsuki-san had to have noticed we were in the middle of a cold war right now. So why didn’t she seem to care? I was trying my best to stay out of her and Kaho-chan’s fight and everything!

“I really don’t have a clue what’s happening,” I said, “but I’m sure there’s no way I can stand in for Satsuki-san in…whatever this is.”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Satsuki-san said.

“You knew I wasn’t cut out for this, but you suggested me anyway?!”

While Satsuki-san may have had the looks to rival Oduka Mai and showed unbelievable talent and charm 24/7, she unfortunately put in nowhere near as much effort as Mai did into her interpersonal interactions. She also spent a comparatively large chunk of her time alone. Satsuki-san may have had a lot going for her, but she used all of it for herself. Honestly, her determination to stick to this principle of hers couldn’t be called anything but cool.

“Very well,” Satsuki-san said. “I’ll let you handle this now, Amaori.”

“Wait, hold on!” I said. “Please don’t leave the two of us alone!”

I made to change my shoes like the wind and book it out of there, but Kaho-chan blocked my path.

"…Rena-chin," she said.

"Oh, um. Uh. Could you, uh. Move out of the way, Kaho-chan?"

I was still new to this whole business of fighting with friends, and as I was unsure what approach to take, the best I could do was kind of whimper at her. I couldn't be like, "Outta my sight!" or "Take a hike!" you know? I mean, that'd be pretty rude. Still, being rude didn't matter when you were mad at someone!

Kaho-chan put her hand to her chin. "Rena-chin, hmm?" she muttered to herself. "I mean, hmmm… Well, maybe that's my only choice. Yeah, this late in the game… But if I use *Rena-chin*… Maaaaaybe it'd work out… Yeah, I think I have a fighting chance."

"Uh…?"

And then Kaho-chan…

…fell to the ground at my feet in a bow.

"I'm so sorry!" she sobbed.

"Huh?!" I cried.

"It's all my fault! I'm super-duper sorry, please forgive me, I'll never say another rude word in my life, I'm so sorry, cross my heart and hope to die, it's all my fault, I prommy!"

She talked so fast my mind stood no chance of keeping up.

"Um," I said.

"I'm sorry!"

"Uh?"

"Please forgive me!"

Whenever I opened my mouth to interject, groveling Kaho-chan shot me down with a suppressive fire of apologies. Heck, this kind of apology could even fit the definition of violence.

Wait a minute. If other students happened to see Kaho-chan kowtowing to me in front of the shoe lockers, absolutely wild rumors

would start flying around. Hold the phone!

"It's okay, Kaho-chan!" I said. "Get up, come on!"

"Does that mean you'll forgive me?" She fluttered her eyelashes.

"Um," I said. "Well."

Flutter, flutter, flutter.

"Okay, fine!" I said. "I'll let you off the hook just this once. Now get up already, will you?"

"Yahoo!" Kaho-chan jumped like she belonged in Super Mario and grabbed my arm. She shoved her grinning face right up into my personal space. Oh god, she was really cute. "Thanks a bunch, Rena-chin! C'mon, let's go back to being besties like we used to be. We'll put that little tiff behind us, m'kay?"

"Hey now," I said. As I ground my teeth in frustration, she looked right at me with those big eyes of hers. This puppy dog eyes + cute girl attack was *strong*.

"Are you still mad at me?" she asked.

"I mean… Uh…"

Kaho-chan looked as determined as a samurai and was ready to launch herself into another bow, so I grabbed her arm and stopped her short.

"Stop, stop, stop!" I said. "I'm not mad, okay? I'm not angry at all."

"Aww, you're so sweet," she said. She purred like a kitten.

"What're you, the cat that got the cream?" I grumbled as Kaho-chan snuggled up to me. This was the first time in my life I'd ever said anything this judgmental, and I'd never once imagined that I'd be saying it to Kaho-chan, the whole school's little sister, of all people. It was mind-blowing to think we'd made up, just like that. Well, no, the root issue was definitely still here. All of a sudden, I felt horribly fatigued. Maybe I was too weak against pretty girls.

"Hey, Rena-chin," Kaho-chan said.

"What now?"

Still clinging to my arm with one hand, Kaho-chan brought the other up to her mouth like she was making a secret deal and whispered,

“There’s just one little thing you gotta help me with to prove that we’re buddies again.”

“Huh?” I said.

What with Ajisai-san’s, Mai’s, and then my own issues, I already felt like I was maxed out on things to worry about. And just when I felt ready to collapse under the weight of these concerns, the words that’d just come out of Kaho-chan’s mouth were like a thread of spider’s silk tossed down to me. Was it the thread that would allow me to climb up to heaven at last, or was I just about to be trapped and eaten? From where I stood, I had no way of knowing.

Thus, with zero idea of what I was getting into, I walked home with Kaho-chan.

“So, didja know that back in ancient Greece it was totally normal for two dudes to be in love with each other?” Kaho-chan asked. “It’s kinda funny how the social norms change so much with the times!”

“Uh-huh,” I said.

Ever since Kaho-chan had perked up a while ago, she’d kept feeding me snippets of trivia. I got the impression from her that she really, really, REALLY didn’t want to bring up the topic of our fight again. I guess I was the only one who still felt weird about the whole thing. I didn’t know how I was supposed to handle someone I’d just had a huge fight with, and I felt totally lost.

With that being said, since I didn’t want to be led into the dark and be regaled with any more of her vast stock of knowledge about mankind’s most ancient weapons, I asked her, “Hey, Kaho-chan, what is it that you want me to do?”

“Ooh, you wanna know?” She gave me the cute puppy-dog eyes again. Her face and whole bearing were adorable, of course, but come on.

“I mean,” I said, “I’m not going to be cool with it if you make me, like, take a mysterious suitcase to the train station without telling me what’s going on.”

Kaho-chan flashed a peace sign at chin height and gave me another incredibly adorable grin. She had quite a selection of different types in her arsenal.

“It’s okay!” she said. “It’s not fishy at all, I promise. Oh, but maybe just like a li’l fishy. Like, it’ll spook you how *not* fishy it is.”

“Prefacing a favor with the fact that it’s not fishy only makes it seem worse,” I told her.

“I mean, you’re gonna have to show a little itty-bitty bit of skin, that’s all. Like, a millimeter’s worth. Just a teensy bit.”

“Ah,” I said. “I just remembered that I have plans. See you later!”

“Huh?!” Kaho-chan grabbed my hand. “C’moooon, pretty please!” Her whining sounded so sincere that I stopped in my tracks. “Since Saa-chan told me no, you’re the only one left I can rely on!”

She looked at me with the eyes of an abandoned puppy. Ugh. Was this the legendary Begging Beam of Ashigaya High’s little sister? Kaho-chan was a far cry from Satsuki-san, who lorded over others through fear. I felt like a training dummy who’d just been stabbed with the spears of guilt. I was horrible at saying no to things asked of me at the best of times, and Kaho-chan had asking for favors down to a science.

“C’mon, Rena-chin,” she said. “It made me so happy to meet you again in high school and everything.”

“Urgh.”

Like an elementary school girl too shy to tell her crush she liked them, Kaho-chan twiddled her fingers as she looked at me. “I just…hate how things were so tense between us.”

“Yeah, but *you* were the one who went out of your way to make things tense,” I pointed out.

Still, if I didn’t forgive her after three rounds of groveling in rapid succession (even if none of them had any actually heartfelt apologies!), then Kaho-chan would have had no choice but to shave her head in penance. The thought of Kaho-chan coming to school with a shaved head made me want to jump out a third-floor window from guilt.

As a newcomer to the whole fighting with friends thing, I didn’t really know the process for patching things up either, so my desire to stubbornly stick to my guns battled with the hope of making peace and letting things get back to normal ASAP. Bah. Maybe there was nothing for it but to be brave too.

Kaho-chan and I were two different people, and there was no way we’d see eye-to-eye about everything. However, figuring out how much

to accept and how much to forgive was a part of social interactions, right? Kaho-chan and I were both upset, but she'd apologized. That meant we could put it behind us. Sure, maybe I didn't feel that way deep inside, but relationships were basically contracts of mutual agreements and compromise. You know, funnily enough, there was a lot more to this fighting and reconciling thing than I'd thought.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, Kaho-chan," I said. "Let's put it all behind us."

"Yippee!" she cheered. "Thanks, Rena-chin! And lemme know when you turn down Mai-Mai, okay?"

"I still haven't made up my mind about that!"

Had we really patched things up? I still had to be careful of Kaho-chan's roving eyes.

"Anyway," I said, "how about you? You're not pissed at me anymore, are you?"

"Hmm," she said. "I'm a li'l annoyed still, but also, it felt good to get all that out in the open. For real. Anyway, this is loads more important than all that! Love ya lots, Rena-chin!"

This freaking girl… What was with the slow voice and the monotone declaration of love? Maybe it was time to take that slap I'd saved up and use it now.

But as much as I found that idea tempting, I couldn't actually slap her. Instead, I wearily asked, "Okay, so what am I supposed to be doing for you?"

"I'll tell you if you promise to do it!" Kaho-chan chirped.

"Uh, I mean…"

"C'mon, c'mon, please, Rena-chin. Please, please, please. I'm not gonna do anything bad to you. Don't leave me, Rena-chin! Please, please, please, please."

I groaned. "But I mean…I'm not cut out to show skin or whatever."

As I tried to avoid her eyes, Kaho-chan whipped out the last ace up her sleeve. "Fine!" she said. "I'll pay you. If you help me out the whole way, I'll pay you in cash. How does that sound? You know what money is, right? If you have enough, you could buy anything you want

—even a whole country."

"Money!" I cried.

"And, if you do the full job…" Kaho-chan raised three fingers. Hey, wait a minute.

"What, you'll pay three thousand yen?" I asked.

As I'd pretty much depleted my savings on my summer vacation trip, money was *very* attractive, but all the same… Sure, I could spend 3k on new games, but I don't know, man…

Kaho-chan's facial expression changed. She looked like a fox who'd just succeeded in dragging her prey into her den.

"Thirty thousand," she said.

"Thirty?!" My eyes blew wide open. What on earth?!

Now sounding perfectly businesslike, Kaho-chan said, "Payment will be rendered on the day of service. You'll take home the cash on the same day."

Yeah, no, this was some sketchy shit. "Bye!" I said. "I'm out!"

"Huh? Hey, wait up!"

Sorry, Kaho-chan, but I wasn't about to go for the bait. I was far, far too much of a good citizen for whatever this was.

I shook off Kaho-chan's attempt at stopping me and sprinted away.

"Money's important, though!" she called after me.

Believe me, I know! But my MP was even more important than that. *Please, don't give me even more things to worry about,* I pleaded.

For some reason, I kept running all the way home even after I left Kaho-chan far behind. After dashing through the front door, I threw my bag down in my room and slid headlong into bed clinging to my one true love. Ah, my lifelong companion, the only being who could lift me out of boredom and make me proclaim my love to all the world: my PS4.

"It's so good to be home, Four-kun!" I said. I held it tight, nuzzling its cold, inhuman plastic casing. People were scary. I couldn't know what they were going to do to me or what they were thinking at any given time. "But you'd never betray me, Four-kun. You're the one thing

that's always here for me."

I nuzzled it with my cheeks. Its hard chassis protected its internal drives and circuit boards. It was a solid, dependable creature. If I was a console too, then I would never need to worry about my right to exist ever again, and instead I'd spend my days bringing joy to many people.

I lay there like that for some time, until my sister came to call me in for dinner but stopped short when she got to my cracked-open door. We stared at each other in silence before she left and pretended like she hadn't seen anything. Heck, I don't think she wanted to even register that the girl sobbing and hugging the game console was actually related to her. Now the only one who understood how I felt, the one there for me both in sickness and in health, was Four-kun.

"Thank you, Four-kun…" I said. "Oh, you're so warm…because I hit the power, I guess."

I decided to go to bed tonight with him in my arms like a little girl sleeping with a stuffed animal. His hard plastic body felt alien, and, if I'm gonna be honest here, I wasn't a fan of how much space he took up in bed. But still, I felt safer with him around. It was like he was protecting my heart, you know? I prayed that when I woke up, I would somehow be in the world of the game, a place with neither personal relationships nor social obligations. In such a place, I could be the owner of a singular legendary sword and an unrivaled unique ability, and even if I had a lot of friends who depended on me, I wouldn't *need* them. I'd still be the living legend capable of smiting the final boss entirely by myself. And was that really so much to ask for?

I daydreamed until sleep eventually claimed me.

When I woke up the next morning, I discovered that I'd kicked the PS4 off the bed and onto the floor in my sleep.

"Four-kun?!" I cried.

He wouldn't turn on. He was completely busted.

"How?" I sobbed as I cradled his broken body. "What have I done to deserve this? Please, someone! Someone please save him!"

My sister, on her way out for morning practice, opened my door a crack and looked at me bawling my eyes out. She sounded utterly disgusted when she groaned, "What have *I* done to deserve *you*?"

***

"Hey, Rena-chan," Ajisai-san said, greeting me with a sunny smile the moment she walked into class. "You're here early today, huh?"

Yeah, I hadn't meant to make anything of it; I just ended up at school early. But I made up my mind to put on a cheerful front before Ajisai-san, so I adopted a smile as bright as hers and waved back.

"Hey…there…Ajisai…san…"

"Rena-chan, are you okay?! Wait, why are your eyes so swollen and red?!"

Welp, I'd messed that one up. Total failure.

"Nah, I'm…fine," I croaked. "I'm totally…okay…don't…worry, I'm…" But a sob slipped out right in the middle of me saying that. I flopped down into my chair without even taking my backpack off first. Oh, great. Now Ajisai-san was looking at me all worried.

"Rena-chan…" she said. "You've really been going through a lot these days, haven't you?"

Oh, she'd noticed? I mean, yes, I had skipped school the other day, got super depressed, fought with Kaho-chan, and now this latest incident was the icing on the cake. I was trying to recover my MP, but I just kept on losing more and more of it. When would I ever catch a break?

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

"I mean, it's really not all that big of a deal," I said. "I just broke my PlayStation, and now it won't start."

Once I actually said it out loud, I realized it wasn't all that serious after all. Who cries over a broken game console anyway? What was I, an elementary school boy? The fact that *this* was the most upsetting thing, over all the other crap I had going on—well, let's just say you could call me Beyoncé, what with the way love had me looking so crazy right now.

I expected Ajisai-san to burst into laughter and give me a scornful look. "What? Are you for real?" (Punctuated with laughter.) "How stupid are you?" (Cue more laughter.)

But instead she looked just as downcast as I was. “Oh…” she said. “That really sucks.”

Ugh, I felt bad for making her upset. I folded in on myself.

Then Ajisai-san’s hand moved, and she started to gently rub me on the head.

“Huh?!” I cried.

“Oh! Oh, uh.” I was so loud that she pulled her hand back and turned away. Her ears turned bright red. “I-I’m sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“O-okay…”

It startled me that she’d try to pet my head right here in the classroom. Well, I mean, not like there was anything wrong with patting a friend on the head to cheer them up, right? But no! Ajisai-san had a crush on me. That meant that she was patting me because she liked me. W-wait, she liked me? Ajisai-san liked *me*? Oh god, oh lord, oh heck. I looked down and fell silent.

“Hey, do you, uh…” Ajisai-san said. “Do you want to come over to my house again sometime?”

“Um. I-I mean…”

Ajisai-san blushed and laced her fingers together over her chest. “Oh no, I didn’t mean that in a weird way. It’s just, like, you still have the game disc, right? So why don’t you bring it over and play it at my place? That’s where I was going with that.”

“Oh, I get what you mean,” I said. “But I still have a couple dozen hours to go before I beat the game, so I’d feel kind of bad holing up in your house the whole time.”

“Ah, gotcha. Yeah, I’m sure it’d be a pain to come over that often. Sorry.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” I said.

Honestly, having such a legitimate excuse to go over to Ajisai-san’s house was a dangerous thing. I might start hanging out there regularly, and then it’d be like we were dating already!

“I appreciate the offer,” I said. “And I would like to hang out over at your place again and all.” I really and truly meant that too.

Ajisai-san looked away, embarrassed, and said, “Okay.”

…Wh-what was going on? This whole scenario left a weird, bittersweet taste in my mouth.

Ajisai-san turned forward and, staring off into space, said, “You know…I’m actually kind of glad.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Oh, well, your console breaking’s awful, of course, but I mean… Oh, never mind.” She waved that thought away and then pressed her hands over her chest. “I meant that you always try to act cheerful in front of me. I’m glad that we got to be more real with each other again today, that’s all.”

“Oh.” I hesitated to go on. Ajisai-san saw right through me. Yeah, I guess I really had been forcing myself because I was so scared she was going to clue in to how awful I was. I’d been trying to make myself look better than I really was, and I thought I’d been doing just fine, but maybe I hadn’t. Maybe I just looked like a pitiful mess in front of her.

“I have no choice but to die,” I said.

“Huh?!” All the blood drained from Ajisai-san’s face. Oh shoot, had I actually said that out loud? Wait, no, that’s not what I meant. I had to live!

“Wait, uh!” I said. “Do I really look that, uh, off…?”

“O-oh, no, you don’t,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just thinking that you must be working really hard, that’s all. You don’t look weird or anything, I promise!”

As I wasn’t good at picking up other people’s emotions and whatnot, I was always (entirely unprompted) imagining hidden nuance in people’s words.

Working really hard = Biting off more than you can chew

I was just thinking = Everyone else has picked up on it too

You don’t look weird or anything = Girl, you look so freaking weird

Bluh. Pressing a hand to the beginning of a stomachache, I looked at Ajisai-san and tried to guess what she was thinking. “Uh, Ajisai-san…” I whimpered. “If you had to pick, would you say you like the

current me more or the past me?"

"Huh? I have to pick? Well, I think I like whoever you *want* to be the best. I mean…it's probably all my fault you were forcing yourself to act happy, huh?" Ajisai-san smiled in self-deprecation.

I mean…I didn't have a good enough excuse, so I lapsed into silence.

"Sorry for springing that on you out of the blue," she said. "I really startled you when I said that, huh? You know what I'm talking about."

Ajisai-san blushed prettily, even though it was early enough that there weren't many other classmates here yet. And even I, as dense as cadmium, knew what she was referring to: the time she'd asked me out.

I shook my head. "No, don't worry about it. I mean… It made me happy. I think."

Ajisai-san giggled. "Thanks. I really had to work up the courage to ask, so hearing you say that's a big relief."

"Hey, you know…" I said, looking at Ajisai-san out of the corner of my eye, "Can I ask, why me?"

"Huh?" she said.

"Oh, I mean… Uh. Why did you. Uh. Um. Me? Why me?"

I looked down at my lap. The reason I explicitly asked her was my own lack of self-confidence. But even if she told me the reason why, I wasn't going to believe her, you know? I *really* hated that I was like this.

Yet Ajisai-san gave the question some serious thought anyway. "I think it's because people's personalities are like Legos, you know?" she said.

"Uh, what?"

She used the index fingers of her two hands to trace a couple of rectangular blocks in the air. "See, Legos come in lots of different shapes and sizes, right? Some fit together perfectly, and some don't. I think I was made to fit with a lot of people's blocks, but all that means is that I'm a pretty common shape."

I was mesmerized as I sat there listening to Ajisai-san take her time to get the words out.

“Your Lego is just…shaped a little differently, so maybe you wouldn’t fit together with a lot of people. But yours is the best shape for me.”

“So you mean, like…we’re compatible?” I asked.

“Yeah. So you know, it’s not about who’s better and who’s worse or whatever, because I like your shape.”

I was at a loss for words. I’m sure Ajisai-san really believed that, but in my world, it definitely did boil down to who was better and who was worse. Honestly, if I was still a loner, I’d have never met Ajisai-san for one simple reason: because she was better and I was most definitely worse. Anyone could see that, clear as day. Therefore, it was only common sense that I had to try and get on her level. Great, now my head was a mess again.

“Hey, Ajisai-san,” I said.

“Hm?”

I…wanted us to stay friends, because I didn’t want to disappoint her. And I almost started to say that too, but in the end, the words wouldn’t come out. Maybe they should have, though. Then I would have told her she was wrong about us being compatible, and this would have ended without me hurting her.

“…Thanks,” I said quietly.

“Yeah, no problem.” Ajisai-san beamed at me as prettily as a flower blooming on the side of the road on the way to school.

Yeah. When it came down to it, I really liked her. And now that I knew about her feelings for me, I couldn’t be as thoughtless as I used to be and spout the “Omg, I like you so much!” and “I’m such a fan!” comments I once did. Sure, it was a matter of course that I’d like Ajisai-san when she was so kind and deeply, deeply considerate. But here’s the thing. I liked Mai and Satsuki-san too—oh, and of course Kaho-chan. Well. Did I? Okay, yeah, I’ll throw her on the list. At any rate, I didn’t know if there was a difference in the way I liked any of them. I had no idea, and yet I had to pick between Mai and Ajisai-san, and then…well, I had to hurt one of them. None of this was anyone’s fault, but what had I done to deserve this?

“Rena-chan…” Ajisai-san said.

If I kept my head down and didn’t say anything, I knew I’d just

make Ajisai-san worried again. That meant I had no choice but to force myself to act cheerful. Ugh, what a vicious cycle.

I still felt all out of whack afterward, but Ajisai-san pretended not to notice. How pathetic of me to go and saddle her with that burden.

As we were packing up to go home after school, suddenly, wild teenage boys appeared! Oh god, boys! I mean, this was a co-ed school, so I'm not sure what I expected. But you know.

"Hey, wassup, Sena and Amaori?" one of the guys said.

"How's it hanging?" said the other. "You two got a sec?"

They were none other than the handsome Shimizu-kun and Fujimura-kun. And they were speaking Ja-man-ese!

"Yeah, what's up?" Ajisai-san said, answering for me as if she were my interpreter. I think she was covering for me but playing it off like it was nothing. God, she was just too helpful.

"Nah, it's just… Damn, this is hard to spit out," said one of the guys.

"Yeah, for real," said the other.

"Why, what's going on?" Ajisai-san asked.

The boys looked at each other. "Man, where should I start…?" said Fujimura-kun. "Oh, yeah, so there's this dude named Kaidou, right? Used to be on our team back when me and Shimizu did junior soccer. Man's a crazy good defender and hella strong. Me and him were rivals, and then one day when our team went on a ski trip, we got lost and had a real close brush with death."

"What he's trying to say," Shimizu-kun jumped in, "is that this dude who goes to another school was hoping to get a chance to talk to you, Sena."

"Huh, me?" Ajisai-san said. She put a hand to her mouth.

Wait, now I wanted to hear about that near-death experience.

"Yeah, you know that photo on Insta you took with us?" Fujimoto-kun asked. "He said you were kinda cute. You wanna come join us and hang out with him sometime?"

"Hmm," said Ajisai-san.

Based on my understanding of how Ajisai-san fundamentally worked, she wouldn't say no as long as she didn't already have any other plans. Maybe they were inviting both of us, but I flatly refused to entertain the possibility. I also feel the need to inform you that I didn't feel even the slightest bit of jealousy that Ajisai-san was to go hang out with guys from other schools. I mean, duh. Ajisai-san was a miraculous global treasure, so to have her stuck with me all the time was actually a loss for her.

Ajisai-san tapped a finger to her chin and then made an apologetic gesture. "Nah, actually, I'm not really in the mood today," she said.

Huh, how unusual.

The guys didn't seem especially phased that she'd turned them down. Fujimura-kun just nodded and went, "Sure, that's chill."

"Yeah, we'll tell him nah," said Shimizu-kun. "Sorry for springing that on you."

"No, no. I'm sorry too," Ajisai-san said.

"Nah, don't worry about it. Kaidou's not just built like a brick; man's an emotional rock too. He'll be fine."

And then they both left. This Kaidou-kun sounded like a real good dude, actually.

Ajisai-san waved goodbye and then exhaled slightly. "I turned them down, huh?" she said.

"You sure did."

A certain possibility crossed my mind and made me shiver, which caused Ajisai-san to grin. "Oh, this wasn't about you, Rena-chan," she said. "I have things I want to get done today too. You know, I've recently started taking baby steps toward realizing that it's okay to turn people down, even if I don't have anything going on."

"R-really?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

Sure, she looked cute when she stood there smiling and telling me that, but she was too radiant to my eyes. I felt like she was showing me the fundamental differences in our makeup. And that made things… well, a little hard for me.

Just then, I saw a girl leaving the classroom. "Oh!" I said,

grabbing my backpack and rising. “Sorry, Ajisai-san, I need to go. See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, sure thing. Catch you later, Rena-chan.”

I scooted out of the classroom with our goodbyes barely finished and almost ran down the hall trying to catch up with the girl ahead of me. Among the whole quintet, she was the one person I felt like I could talk to without getting too flustered.

When I fell into step beside her, she glanced at me and tilted her head. “Do you need me for something, Amaori?” she asked.

“Oh, nah, not really,” I said. “I was just, uh, wondering if we could walk home together.”

“Suit yourself.”

Satsuki-san turned around again to face forward with a bored expression. I remembered when she’d told me she’d never liked me all that much to begin with. You know, given how much I didn’t want other people to hate me, I think Satsuki-san might have been the person I felt most comfortable around. She was cold to everyone, the flipside of how Ajisai-san was kind to everyone. I knew she’d be mean to me no matter what, so I didn’t have to get my hopes up for anything better. We could just always stay friends forever. There was something oddly calming about the way she looked at me like I was a deplorable weed.

“Is Sena all right?” she asked me.

“Eeep!” Well, so much for calming. I felt like she’d just headshotted me. “H-how much do you know, Satsuki-san?”

“Nothing major,” she said. “I don’t particularly care, really. It’s only that you’re such a hopelessly dishonest sort that I’ve more or less gathered there’s an issue.”

“Ouch. I’m just trying to do my best to get through the day, you know.”

“It’s not like you have a choice in the matter,” she said. “Some people are such scum that they can be horrid nuisances merely by existing.”

“Wait, there’s legit people like that? That’s horrible!”

Satsuki-san stabbed me with a cool look. Ow.

We passed through the school gates and began walking to the

train station. My shoulders slumped. “Hey…” I said. “What do you think I should do?”

“It’s none of my business,” she replied. “But let me give it some thought.”

Satsuki-san looked like she genuinely didn’t care, but she didn’t let that stop her from considering my plight anyway. Oh, my good friend Satsuki-san, always coming in clutch.

“I think you’d be fine doing what you want, no?” she said. “If you choose either of them—or choose neither; that’s also an option—the one or ones you didn’t pick will still feel sad either way.”

“Guh.”

I mean, I’d been thinking the exact same thing, but it felt so much more real when she said it flat-out like that.

“Again, it’s none of my business,” she added. “I don’t know whatever it is you and Sena have talked about. Goodness, if it isn’t one thing with you, it’s another. I’m not a customer service rep, you know.”

Satsuki-san glared at me. Yikes.

“You’re right, though,” I admitted. “I’ve really been half-assing my way through all of this.”

“You have,” she agreed. “But if you’d chosen Mai from the start, I doubt Sena would have been able to voice her feelings. Someone’s right answer is always someone else’s unhappy answer. It’s exactly like that three-way match of ours, because when you won, Mai and I lost.”

“Wait,” I said. “But if I hadn’t won, I would have ended up in major trouble!”

“If I’d won, you also wouldn’t be struggling with this issue right now,” she pointed out.

“Huh?!”

She said it so nonchalantly that it made my heart skip a beat. Had Satsuki-san won, not only would she and I be dating, but we’d be engaged to be married. I guess she’d be waking me up in the mornings, drilling me before exams, joining me in the tub at night, and washing me down with that sexy bod of hers… An outrageous idea, that. But I suppose I really wouldn’t have been worried about Mai vs Ajisai-san if that were the case.

“I’m pretty sure that would’ve given me a whole new set of things to struggle with,” I told her.

“Well, that’s the point.” She elegantly ran a hand through her hair. “Life is all about decisions. We aren’t omnipotent, so we don’t know what the future might hold. We have no choice but to continue with the decisions we’ve made, even if, yes, we know we’ll regret these decisions.”

My backpack felt all the heavier as her profound words sunk in. “You’re really grown up, Satsuki-san,” I told her.

“I’m really not,” she said. “No more than you are. All I do is live with regret for my past actions just as you do. It’s like how I knew going to school with Mai was a bad idea, but I couldn’t *not* go.”

As I gazed into the depths of the enmity contained within her eyes, I decided to cut this conversation short before it went any further in that direction. First things first.

“Relationships are so complicated,” I said.

Satsuki-san pulled some writing utensils from her bag. “They are,” she agreed. “Here, let’s draw a chart of your current situation.”

“Wait, a chart?!”

Satsuki-san’s eyebrows furrowed as she walked along taking notes. “Who is this ‘Four-kun’?” she asked.

“He’s my emotional support,” I said. “He’s kind of broken at the moment, though.”

“Ah.” Satsuki-san did not pursue the matter further, which I think was her way of being kind.

“Oh, you made an error,” I pointed out. “The line going from you to me is supposed to say, ‘Absolute best friends who cherish each other deeply,’ right?”

“It agonizes me to know that you never behave this shamelessly around other people,” she said as she closed her notebook with a snap. “You needn’t answer me right away, and it doesn’t really matter a bit to me whether or not you answer to begin with. However, if you aren’t planning on responding to Sena soon, why not take a detour first?”

Wants to be girlfriends
Wants to be best friends
Object of worship
Wants to be girlfriends
Friends
Pain in the ass
Please get me fixed
True love
Wants her assistance
Quarreling
Four-kun

“What do you mean by a detour?” I asked.

“In order to make it until the end of survival mode, don’t you need to stockpile your weapons first? Sometimes, taking a detour is actually the shortest road of all.”

“Oh, Satsuki-san!” I cried. “It’s so nice of you to use a game analogy so that I’d actually understand what you mean! I can feel the friendship coming off you in torrents! Oh, I’m so happy. You’re right! I want to keep leveling up so that someday I can face any kind of trouble and take care of you for a change!”

“I’m sure you have more important things to worry about than me,” she said. “A sense of morals, for one, or societal standards.”

Her encouragement made me perk up a little. But, hmm…a detour? What would make for a good detour? Going into the mountains and training under a waterfall was out of the question. I guess I could try a new type of makeup to make myself more feminine…maybe? I mean, this was *me* we were talking about.

“And now,” Satsuki-san continued, “this wraps up our conversation.”

“Huh?”

Satsuki-san pointed at a girl standing waiting for us in front of the train station. “Heya!” the girl called. *It was Kaho-chan.* Wait, hello?!

“I leave her in your able hands, Kaho,” Satsuki-san said.

“You got it!” Kaho-chan chirped. “Now, c’mon, Rena-chin!”

“Wait, what’s going on?” I said. “Satsuki-san, did you just sell me out? But we swore to be friends forever! Forever, Satsuki-san! Satsuki-san?!”

Satsuki-san walked away without so much as giving me a parting glance. Kaho-chan, meanwhile, grabbed my arm and dragged me into the station. Frick you, Satsuki-san!

Kaho-chan grinned as she walked next to me.

“You didn’t need to be so forceful,” I grumbled.

“Thanks for agreeing to hear me out, Rena-chin!” she said.

“Nah, it’s nothing,” I said. “I mean, I’m just in it for the money.”

It was all because Four-kun was busted. At this point, I had no

choice but to send him in for repairs. I'd looked it up over lunch, and it seemed like the price would vary a lot depending on whether he needed any of his parts or even his circuit board replaced. But my piddly allowance wasn't going to cut it for even the cheapest repairs, so I needed cash. Ugh. *Hey, do you think maybe Kaho-chan broke Four-kun in my sleep? With, like, telekinesis or something?*

"Oh hey, by the way," I said, "what's up with you and Satsuki-san? How come you two are running a whole badger game kinda thing? Are you two…?"

"Hm?" Kaho-chan said. "You wanna know? Me and Saa-chan are just buddies."

She put her hand to her mouth and giggled with a leer. Her smug attitude pissed me off.

"I-I mean, yeah, I do want to know," I said. After all, Satsuki-san was *my* precious friend, thank you very much. Yes, she and Kaho-chan might also have been as thick as thieves, but your point?

"Oh well. Guess I have to make an exception and spill the tea, huh?" Kaho-chan said. "See, Saa-chan helps out by working with me. It started off with me asking her on a whim, 'cause I figured there was no harm in trying, yanno? But then she said she wanted to earn some cash, and so now it's a win-win all around."

Oh, okay. So they had a business relationship, certainly nothing worth worrying about. It wasn't like my relationship with her, where I'd shared a bath with her and even kissed her. I mean, I'd been forced into both of those situations, but still!

At any rate, was this "work" she mentioned the same thing that she wanted me to help with?

"This 'work' of yours sounded fishy as heck to me," I said, "but if Satsuki-san's been involved, then that's some comfort."

"You wouldn't tell from looking at her, but she's a real pushover," said Kaho-chan.

"You…think so?" Well, Satsuki-san was a pretty good caregiver, all things considered. She also had a sense of trustworthiness about her, like you could ask her for help and know that she'd respond. "Kaho-chan, are you sure you're not just taking advantage of her?"

"Ouch! All I did was ask really, really sincerely. Still, she did tell

me no, like, a hundred times before she gave in."

"Jeez," I said. "If you were any more mentally stable, they'd put horses in you."

For some reason, talking with Kaho-chan always made me so flippant. Maybe you get in a fight once and then it's no holds barred afterward.

At any rate, whatever Kaho-chan was going to ask me to do was bad enough that Satsuki-san had said no a hundred times. Why, oh why, did I say yes the first time she asked?

"It's 'cause Saa-chan's so pretty, y'know?" Kaho-chan said. "She's got a cute face, a good head on her shoulders, and one rockin' bod. She's totally godlike. I'm her biggest fan!"

"I agree one hundred percent," I said. "But I thought you were more of a Mai fan, right?"

Kaho-chan chuckled. "Please. Don't think I switched faves just because you were about to snatch her away. I've been into Saa-chan for ages."

I felt a little nervous when she casually brought up the topic that had spawned our fight, but Kaho-chan looked like she'd already forgotten all about the business of the other day. She tugged on her black shirt with its high neckline.

"See what I'm wearing?" she said. "It's Saa-chan's color."

"Uh, because it's black?" I said. "Isn't that kind of a stretch?"

"I just love pretty girls like her who are so put together," Kaho-chan went on as she clasped her hands together. "I mean, I'm pretty sure *everyone* does."

I nodded along instinctively. "Yeah, that's beauty for you, right?"

We both sighed in admiration and nodded like a couple of connoisseurs. I almost felt like this was a conversation our classmates Hasegawa-san and Hirano-san would have. Man. Talking like this with her brought me back to old times, back when we discussed our favorite characters in cram school.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Kaho-chan broke out into a grin. "Hey, 'member how we used to talk like this in cram school?"

"Huh?" I said. "Oh, uh, yeah."

I felt oddly bashful as those old, fond memories came rushing back. Kaho-chan had become such a dazzling, adorable person, and sometimes I felt nervous just standing next to her. But even so, I felt way more relaxed than I had before, and I could grin at her so much more naturally. Maybe it was for the best that we'd had a fight and laid everything out in the open like that. This way, we had nothing to hide from each other. I guess everything in life happened for a reason. Now I was finally starting to see the silver linings in clouds, which was the secret to success in a life that was permanently overcast. Just the thought soothed my anxiety.

I asked Kaho-chan, "So, where are we going today?"

"Oh, my place," she said.

"Wow, really?" That meant I'd have been to every one of my friends' houses. First was Mai's, then Satsuki-san's and Ajisai-san's, and now here was Kaho-chan's bringing up the rear.

"C'mon," she said. "I know getting invited over to a girl's place can be nerve-racking, but you don't gotta be so stiff."

"I'm really not nervous, is the thing," I told her.

"Why not? You should be! Okay, fine—my parents *won't be home* 'til late. Take that!"

"Thank god," I said. "That means I can be in and out without having to meet your parents."

"And we have a hundred tigers free roaming the yard, so there!"

"That's not something to be nervous about! That's just straight-up lethal!"

We arrived at her house still bantering. Her place looked a lot like mine, but the first thing to catch my eye in her big yard was a doghouse.

"You guys have a dog?" I asked.

"Yup," she said. "But we keep her indoors this time of year 'cause it's still hot. She stays indoors in the winter too 'cause we feel bad about her getting cold. Ever since Dad remarried, he's been all over my stepmom, so Mokeko's the only one who really cares about me in this family."

"Ouch," I said. "That's some serious stuff."

My family had never had a dog or cat, so I didn't know how things worked with other people's pets. The closest thing I had to pets were my Pokémon, and those didn't count.

"Thanks for having me," I said.

"Make yourself at home!"

There was an untidy heap of shoes in the entranceway. Kaho-chan had never mentioned having any brothers or sisters, but it sure didn't look like she was an only child. Maybe these belonged to her stepmom's family.

"Here, this way," she said, beckoning me as I put on a pair of dog-themed house slippers and followed her up to the second floor.

The place felt lived-in, I decided, as I crossed the hallway and walked into her room. The sewing machine in the corner immediately drew my eye. Kaho-chan must have known how to sew. When I looked closer, I also saw colored boxes full of fabric and shelves covered with sewing items all over the room. The whole thing felt really girly.

Kaho-chan sidled up to me and gave me the puppy-dog eyes, her large pupils almost catlike. "So, whatcha think?" she said. "See how we're alone? You gettin' nervous yet?"

Well, that gesture was a little startling, or maybe just cute.

"Why are you trying so hard to make me flustered?" I asked.

"'Cause that's the best mindset for you to be in if I'm gonna make you do what I want."

"That's a lot more logical than I expected. And dirty too!"

Kaho-chan giggled cheekily. Every single one of her gestures was adorable but oh so irritating. Seriously, where had she learned to act this way? Had she been training in cuteness in the Hyperbolic Time Chamber or something?

Suddenly, Kaho-chan whipped out her phone. "Oops, sorry," she said. "Couldja give me a sec to respond to my messages? I get so many it takes, like, forever to clear 'em all. I've got 999 messages in my inbox right now."

"From a single day?! That's a ton!"

Does she not think that's a bit much? I found it difficult just to check when I had ten at a time, never mind responding to all of them.

Kaho-chan screamed, her fingers flying with the speed of a fighting game pro. When I side-eyed her—so as not to read the messages themselves—I saw her busting out texts faster than I could type at my keyboard. Then she went, “Okay, done!”

“Calm down, speed demon!” I cried.

Kaho-chan flung her phone on the bed. She lived her life at a pace way too different from mine. We had to be equipped with a whole different engine. If Kaho-chan was a sports car, then I was a pullback toy car.

Kaho-chan pretended to think for a second for my benefit and then wagged a finger at me. “Eh, whatever. I mean, it doesn’t matter if I blow ’em off a bit, y’know? After all, I’m here to give all my attention to you, Rena-chin.”

That sly fox.

“I-if you think that cute act will make it easier for you to get me to do what you want, you’ve got another thing coming!” I snapped at her.

“Oh?” Kaho-chan shimmied up to me. *H-hey now!* I thought. Then she pressed her ear to my chest. Oh god, she was so close! I could smell her hair, and it smelled nice!

“Wh-what?” I said. “Why this all of a sudden?”

“Y’see, Rena-chin…” Kaho-chan leered at me. “Your heart’s beating *awfully* fast.”

“It’s not! And it wasn’t beating fast when you were pulling all that other stuff either! Jeez! Every living thing has a heartbeat, you know!”

Kaho-chan continued to smirk evilly as she stared straight at me. I couldn’t handle it, and so I looked away. Look, it’s not that she was making my heart pound or anything, but I was too socially awkward to make eye contact. Yes, I knew it was a sorry excuse!

“Now that I think about it,” Kaho-chan said, “you did say you were frettin’ over Mai-Mai and Aa-chan asking you out. Does that mean… Rena-chin, are you into girls?”

“No!” God, I kept having to refuse this over and over and OVER. “I’m *not* into girls, okay? None of you will believe me!”

“Your heart skipped a beat just then,” Kaho-chan pointed out.

“Yeah, but you’d get all flustered if Mai started pursuing you too, wouldn’t you?”

“Duh,” said Kaho-chan. “But I already like Mai-Mai. My heart would skip a beat ’cause I like cute girls.” She poked my cheek. “And I like you too, Rena-chin!”

“Eeep!”

Kaho-chan gave me a teasing grin, her little fang sticking out, and I backed away without thinking. She seemed to be having more fun by the moment.

“Oh ho, I see,” she said. “I should have skipped the money and the crying and gone for this right from the start.”

“Look, I know I’m pathetic, okay?!”

God, how had I ended up like this? It was all Mai’s fault. Still, the fact that it hadn’t let up at all made me think I’d sort of been like this right from the start. But the reason my heart rate accelerated whenever I saw a cute girl was because I longed to be one of them. My heart yearned to be in the company of those cute, outgoing girls. So, once I was recognized as one of their number, surely this little problem would fix itself. One could only hope!

“Mai, Satsuki-san, and Ajisai-san are one thing,” I said, “but I can’t believe that you could make my heart skip a beat… Not when I’ve known you for years… How frustrating!”

Maybe the reason I hadn’t been able to slap Kaho-chan during our fight was because I hadn’t wanted to hurt such a pretty face. It was a 10:0 loss for me.

Kaho-chan cackled like the demon toying with my emotions that she was.

“Just you wait,” I said. “You’ll pay for this someday, I swear.”

“But I’m not shameless like you, Rena-chin. I don’t get all hot ’n bothered the second I run across someone cute.”

“You little…!” I cried. “You said you liked me, okay? You’re an evil temptress!”

“An ‘evil temptress’? I kinda like the sound of that.” Kaho-chan grinned in delight. *Ooh, just you wait,* I thought. *You’re gonna get it.* “Honestly, I don’t mind just staying here and flirting with you the whole

day—”

“Look, if you don’t need anything from me, I’ll just go home!”

“—and now that you’ve brought it up, let’s talk business.”

Kaho-chan ushered me out of her room toward the one next door. “It’d probably be faster just to show you,” she said.

There was a nameplate on the door that read, “The Curséd Realm 💀 – Death and Hell Await – NO Trespassing.”

“This is going *way* overboard!” I shouted. What on earth did she *mean,* it was faster to show me this?

“Now,” Kaho-chan cried, “I shall break the seal!” She pulled a little key out of her pocket and put it in the doorknob. “The time has come to free the demon locked away for five hundred million years.”

“What on earth do you have that’s been shut up since the Cambrian Period?” I asked. “The apex predator of the ancient world, the Anomalocaris?”

As Kaho-chan was constantly being ridiculous, she left me with no choice but to bring her back to reality. Was this also a part of her plan? Was I really this easy to read? Was it really such fun leading me along by the nose?!

As I screamed internally, Kaho-chan locked eyes with me and smirked. *Urgh.* I felt like I’d never be able to get the upper hand against her, and I meant that in a different way than I did about Satsuki-san. *Come on, Renako, don’t give up!* I told myself. *She started at the same place as you back in elementary school!*

“Now, open sesame!” Kaho-chan cried and yanked open the door with a flourish to reveal…well, not a glittering treasure trove, of course. But there were tons and tons of clothes on racks. I couldn’t imagine that all of them were Kaho-chan’s, but it was still impressive. Seeing this many outfits reminded me of an idol or a model’s dressing room.

“These are all my beloved costumes!” Kaho-chan said.

“Wait a sec,” I said. These weren’t just ordinary clothes. Some were dresses covered in huge bows or gothic lolita outfits with distinct color palettes. Others were uniforms we didn’t wear at Ashigaya High. There were also a couple of maid outfits with odd designs sitting side by side with cat-ear hoodies and a row of colored wigs. This wasn’t a dressing room. It was a cosplay costume room!

Kaho-chan giggled in triumph. “Whatcha think?” she said. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“This is amazing,” I breathed. “Did you make all of these? That’s beyond amazing!”

She even had swords, guns, and armor pieces nicely set up on display. I felt like I’d just walked into a costume shop. Then, with a gasp, the door to the memories that had been sealed for a good bit less than five hundred million years creaked open ominously.

“Hmm?” Kaho-chan said as I pointed a trembling finger at her.

“You,” I said. “You’re Nagipo@TeenCosplayer!”

“Oopsies.” Kaho-chan touched her cheek and broke out into a bashful grin. “You found out, huh? Aww, it’s kinda embarrassing to hear it out loud. No one at school’s eeeeever noticed, so I guess that makes you my *first*.”

She poked the area near my collarbone, much to my annoyance, as it made me squeak.

I’d accidentally stumbled upon a photo of her and Satsuki-san cosplaying while I was on that trip over summer vacation, and the account that’d uploaded it was Nagipo@TeenCosplayer. Of course, with all the makeup and editing, she seemed totally different, but there were still traces of her normal self there. Above all else, the decisive evidence was that I could see how she’d gone from Koyanagi Kaho to Nagipo. It must have been an enormous shock to find out that my friends were cosplayers, but even so, how did it slip my mind until this very moment? I guess I must have had zero kilobytes of storage left.

Kaho-chan had bookshelves in her costume room too, and these were filled with anime Blu-rays and manga volumes. Kaho-chan picked up one of the latter and hugged it to her chest.

“I can’t draw or write stories,” she said, “so cosplay is my way of showing my love for the work. And once I started, I could never look back.”

“Oh, wow,” I said.

“Nowadays I do it ’cause I love it, of course, but I also think it’s nice to spread awareness of the series I like with my costumes. That’s how I got hooked on it, and now here we are.” She gestured broadly to show off the room and then rubbed the spot above her lip. “Looking

back on it, I guess I've come a long way."

"You're honestly incredible, Kaho-chan."

I liked video games, sure, but I never felt the need to enter tournaments or anything. And I'd never thought about making everyone else see how fun the game was. Although…if more copies sold, the devs'd be more likely to put out a sequel, and games were always fun with more players. So maybe there was a point to this after all. Still, there was no freaking way I could do this kind of thing. That's why I thought Kaho-chan was so incredible for coming to this decision and pulling it off.

"Aww, stop," she said. "You'll make me blush."

"I think this is the first time I've really looked up to you," I said.

"Excuse me?" She whacked me. "I've given you loads of things to admire."

It must have taken her a ton of courage to come out to me as a cosplayer. Lord knows it certainly set me on edge to admit that I was a gamer, let alone anything like this. Well, maybe this was in return for me telling Kaho-chan about Mai and Ajisai-san or something.

Kaho-chan rummaged through the clothes racks as I stood there thinking.

"Hmm, which one'll work?" she hummed. "Oh, it's gotta be this one. Yeah, for sure."

She drew out a bunny maid costume complete with rabbit ears. It was from an anime that had aired a little while ago but still had a big following; I recognized it instantly because it came across my Twitter timeline so often. If Kaho-chan had really made this herself, that was awe-inspiring.

"Oh, are you going to put on a costume for me?" I asked. The thought made me really excited. Considering how cute Kaho-chan was and how cute the costume was, how cute would the finished product be? One could only assume scarily good.

But Kaho-chan shook her head. "Nuh-uh," she said with a leer. "This is *your* costume, Rena-chin."

"Huh?"

“What?!” I cried, standing in Kaho-chan’s room stripped down to my bra and undies. “Wait, no. This is a bit. Um. Uh.”

I tried to use my hands to ward off Kaho-chan’s eyes, but she ran them all around me checking me out, as if she were sampling my entire body.

“Wow,” she said. “Your boobs are ginormous.”

My face immediately heated up at that presumptuous comment. “Excuse me?! Where do you get off saying that?”

Kaho-chan grabbed a rope-looking thing and snapped it in front of me.

“Wh-what are you going to do to me with that thing?”

“Well, what would *you* like me to do to you?”

I tried backing away, but Kaho-chan kept on coming. “St-stop,” I said. “Please, spare me. Stay away!”

“Calm down, calm down,” she said, still chuckling.

“Nooo!”

Kaho-chan’s arms twined about my waist—and, a few seconds later, she stepped back with my measurements.

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I told you not to.”

“Ho ho,” she said. “I see. Not half-bad, if I do say so myself!”

I groaned some more, tears trickling down my cheeks as Kaho-chan carried on with the tape measure. What kind of punishment was this, having my smaller, cuter classmate take my measurements? She sized my hips and bust as I stood there devastated. Alas, my private information!

“Why’re you doing this to me?” I moaned.

“I need to measure you to tailor the dress to fit, duh,” she said. “Those honkers of yours would rip right through my poor costume.”

“Can you please stop going on about my boobs?!” I covered my bra with both hands. I normally would have been like, “Oopsie, sorry you had to see that,” but I felt mortified when she kept drawing attention to them. We were girls going through puberty, for Pete’s sake.

“Also, what do you mean by tailor?” I asked.

“For you to wear,” she explained. “You’ll be wearing that cute

costume of mine."

"Gotcha…"

Really, I'd had the vague feeling she'd do this for a while now. Satsuki-san had allowed Nagipo-chan to take a shot of them both, but I couldn't picture Sa—I mean, Moon-san willingly choosing to do cosplay of her volition. Granted, she was clearly a *total stranger* to me, but I was still convinced of this. If you asked Moon-san if she liked cosplay, she seemed like the type to go, "About all I know is cellophane tape." That meant Mootsuki-san had been in it for the money, and since she was busy now, that role had passed to me. I was prepared for something this tough, because you didn't earn 30,000 yen easily. But it was fine. It was a million times better than being forced to stand at a cash register and strike up conversations with strangers.

"Can I ask if you, uh…chose me for this because of my boobs?" I said.

If she had, she'd have been better off asking Ajisai-san. Wait, but Ajisai-san couldn't be made to prance about in such skimpy clothing!

Kaho-chan looked serious and shook her head. "Nah, nah, nah," she said. "I just thought your whole vibe would be perfect for the character."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Like, you know—let's say you have, uh, a standoffish, tall girl with long black hair. You can't have a flirtatious little cutie like me play her, y'know?"

A hypothetical situation, I was sure, and one that just so happened to describe our classmate's particular features exactly. But I got what she meant.

"Well, the boobage was also a perk," Kaho-chan acknowledged. "2D characters are busty by default, so these costumes look better if you have the chest for 'em."

My eyes naturally traveled to Kaho-chan's chest. It was as flat as a board.

Kaho-chan promptly gave me the stink eye. "You're a big ol' perv, Rena-chin," she said.

"Um, after the things *you* just said to me?!"

Darn this girl! She wouldn't ignore even a single chance to take potshots at me!

"Well, I can always make my own boobs, so it's not really a big deal," Kaho-chan went on. "I can wear a NuBra, or I can wind cloth around my chest or make something out of silicon. I'm free to have as big or as little titties as I want. Boobs are accessories in the cosplay world."

"Interesting…"

"But like, personally? I totally wish I was as big as you!" she said. "Check out those knockers! Look, see!"

I accidentally let out a high-pitched, girlish squeal from embarrassment as Kaho-chan grabbed my chest. I mean, I *was* a girl—but it was just so embarrassing!

"Cut it out already!" I cried.

In retaliation, I grabbed her chest too.

Kaho-chan pulled away in a very girlish pose and screamed, "Eeek! You're scaring me, Rena-chin!"

And then I… I… I gulped and pulled my hand back. I had no other choice. I was a stranger to platonic touches in the world of women. I turned bright red when Ajisai-san so much as touched my shoulder, so to fondle someone's boobs, even as a joke, was entirely out of the question.

Kaho-chan put a hand to her mouth and whispered, "Oh? You're gonna stop there?"

"I-I don't think I'm up for that today."

Kaho-chan giggled. "Aww, you're being a li'l wimp-wimp. Okay, wussy-wuss!"

This freaking girl! One of these days, she was going to get it, I swear.

Once Kaho-chan got all the messing with me out of her system, she stood up. "'Kay, let's give this another shot," she said. "Hands in the air!"

Now she went back to taking my detailed measurements, from my biceps to my thighs and beyond. The thought of petite Kaho-chan knowing about me in such detail made me grit my teeth internally.

Eventually, I put my clothes back on and sat down meekly in Kaho-chan's room. That was an ordeal and a half for sure.

While Kaho-chan jotted down all my private information, she nodded in self-satisfaction. "Yup. I'm gonna have to do a lot of tailoring, just like I figured. Still shouldn't take more than a week, though."

I felt relieved to have the thickness of the summer uniform's fabric on my body once more. Clothes were awesome. They were a suit of protective armor.

"So does that mean I can wear it next week?" I asked.

"You betcha," she said. "I'll have you put it on a week from now, and once more two weeks from now. So that's two times in total. That's gonna be your task."

I thought it over. "And you'll pay me 30,000 yen for that?"

"Mmm, well, I dunno." Kaho-chan looked away and started whistling.

"Wait, was that all a lie?!" I cried. "Your reaction totally tells me you were lying!"

Kaho-chan quietly shook her head and then, in a tone of voice you'd use to reason with a small child, said, "Okay, listen to me, Rena-chin. That wasn't a lie. It's just that I didn't tell you one very important detail."

"Well, hurry up and spit it out then!"

She lifted a finger and put it right in front of my face, as if to keep my fury in check.

"What I'm gonna have you do for me is very simple," Kaho-chan said. "All it requires is putting on a costume and a bunch of makeup—with me, that is."

"With you?" I repeated.

This slim, pretty, petite girl beamed at me. "Yup! And we'll have a group photoshoot of us all dressed up!"

***

A week later, she brought me to a photography studio on the

outskirts of Tokyo.

"…Huh?" I said.

And yet I still hadn't realized that I'd been tricked again. Because there was another photoshoot waiting in the wings, and I didn't have a clue that I'd have to wear my costume *in front of a giant crowd of people*.

Chapter 2:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Do My First Cosplay!

"WE'RE HELLA lucky here at Ashigaya," the girl next to me said as I stood at the sink washing my hands on the third day of high school. "They're pretty chill with phones, y'know?"

She was speaking awfully loudly for someone talking to herself, but there was no one else around and the girl's bathroom was totally soundproof to the outside world.

"…Pardon?" I said.

The girl—Koyanagi Kaho—eyed herself in the mirror as she touched up her lipstick. She was short, with brightly colored hair tied up on one side of her head. Her slender back had a pretty S shape, and her small face and slim body made her look even more petite than she was.

"At one of my friends' schools, see," she went on, "you gotta apply for permission to carry your phone with you. And then you need to, like, get the principal's permission too, not just your homeroom teacher's! Even with all that, you have to put it away in your locker the minute you get to school and can't take it out until after class. Isn't that cray-cray?"

The girl turned and looked at me. Her large eyes sparkled, reflecting the light like a cat's. Cute little fangs peeked out past her lips. The first impression I got from seeing her so up close was that she was like a house cat who'd evolved to get more attention from people.

"Well. Um," I said. In class, I was fighting for dear life to fake being social, but my social anxiety reared its ugly head when she randomly started talking to me. I looked away from her. "I mean, I don't really. Um. Use my phone at school all that much."

"Nah, that's not what you're s'posed to say." The girl wagged her finger at me.

Typically, when people disagreed with me, I took so much damage I resolved to never speak again for as long as I lived. (I mean, I used to. I grew out of that.) But for some reason, I didn't have that

reaction around this girl.

"See," she went on in crisp tones, "we all get moments when we're like, 'OMG, I'll die without my phone!' Y'know? Like when you need to register a group chat, for instance. You can go a day without drinking water, but that's no reason to put up with them banning water, you feel me?"

I realized then that she was the kind of girl to respond with ten words for every one of mine. "Yeah, I guess you have a point," I mumbled.

"Right? Like, it's not an issue about it being zero or one. It's like going from one to one hundred. Toootally different. So that's why I'm super glad I go to Ashigaya. I feel bad for my poor friend stuck in electronics jail!"

"Uh, what's electronics jail?"

After I left the bathroom, the girl followed me and walked with me back to classroom A. One part of my brain was screaming, "Wait, why is she coming with me?!" even though I knew she was a part of class A too.

This girl's ability to carry on a conversation with me, even though we'd never talked before, was totally overwhelming. And even when I got back to the classroom and rejoined the group with Mai and Ajisai-san, the girl slipped right in with us completely naturally, making our conversations more animated and fun than ever.

Looking back on it now, I guess that Kaho-chan must have recognized me and was trying to scope me out when I didn't react to her. I felt bad for not knowing it was her, but I mean, she'd grown so freaking cute. She was like a whole different person now.

There was another memory that stuck with me, this one from cram school over summer break. It was one of those innocent moments when we sat next to each other poring over manga magazines and chatting away before class started.

"Oh, Amaori-san," Minaguchi-san said. "Did you read this week's update already?"

"Yeah!" I said. "The whole time, I kept thinking about how much I

wanted to talk about it with you!"

"Oh, um. Well…I was thinking the same thing," she admitted with a giggle.

Minaguchi-san was just a bit taller than me, wore glasses, and had a light in her eyes that dazzled me.

"I love that one character," I said. "It's kinda funny. Don't you think she's cooler than the actual protagonist?"

"You really like girls like that, huh? That makes sense to me."

I giggled self-consciously. "Do you think that's odd?"

"Oh, no, not at all! I feel the same way, or…well, I wish I could be like her…"

My heart oscillated wildly as those two memories of the past and the present came and went. It was almost like I myself had no idea which side to show to her and which side of her to talk with—the more outgoing side or the more withdrawn side. But either way… See, here's the thing. I felt really bad because Kaho-chan liked Mai, and yet Mai asked *me* out, and so now I couldn't be totally honest with her about how I felt. And here's the thing. Sure, I might have called Kaho-chan rude names and complained about this whole job of hers, but still. The thought that Kaho-chan and I could once again do something new together, just like we used to—well, that made me really, really happy.

…But, alas, we couldn't just end it there on that high note. Not with this new, cunning Kaho-chan.

***

On Saturday, Kaho-chan took me to a photography studio just a bit outside of the city center. It was a nice photogenic spot, originally for small weddings and whatnot, that could then be rented out for private photography.

"Ooh," I said. "This is pretty cool. So you take pictures and stuff here?"

"I've also gotten up super early in the morning and done guerilla-style photography around town," she said, "but I guess in the end, I

wind up coming here most often."

"Cool." I kept oohing and aahing as I looked up at the pretty exterior. It was much more dignified than I would have imagined. "You're awesome, Kaho-chan! No wonder you're such a popular cosplayer."

Kaho-chan chuckled. "Oh, stop, you'll make me blush. But go on!"

"You're the best cosplayer in the world," I said. "The electronic fairy! And the master of photo editing! You're a sly devil with the way you flirt. And hotheaded! Plus, you keep bringing up rocks at a moment's notice. And you have a hair-trigger temper!"

"Hey, if you're going to say nice things, then don't switch gears halfway through! Jeez. Oh, whatever. Let's get down to business."

"Oh, okay!"

What I didn't know about cosplay could fill a book, so I studied my butt off so hard even Kaho-chan got freaked out. First, I watched the two-season anime, which I finished within the span of two weekdays. It was really good, a cozy slice-of-life show with some scenes that hit me in the feels. Next, I rewatched the scenes of the girl I planned to cosplay over and over again. I practiced her catchphrases repeatedly and tried to become her, even if only in an emotional sense. I even watched my facial expressions and poses in front of the mirror. This part of the practice went by relatively easily, as it was similar to what I'd done when I was training to be a social butterfly. But I still overworked myself and went to bed every night with aching muscles. Posing really took a toll on the body. Even during the commute to school, I hunted through fanworks to deepen my understanding of the character. I spent a lot of this time reading fanfic on Pixiv, absorbing the various takes on her and working hard to bring the inner mindset of the character to life.

Kaho-chan seemed a little creeped out by it. "Why're you trying so hard?" she asked.

I couldn't exactly say, "Because I want to upstage you after you forced me into this, so there." Instead, I told her something like, "I've had a divine revelation."

Even I wasn't totally sure why I was working so hard on this, but I just felt like something would transform if Kaho-chan really and truly

acknowledged my hard work and told me I was doing a good job. Periodically, I fell back into depression and thought, “What am I doing with myself? How dare I ignore the Mai and Ajisai-san situation?” But I still had some time before my deadline. Besides, Satsuki-san, of all people, had told me that making a detour first could be the right move. Therefore, I decided to throw myself headlong into the task I’d been charged with. Wait. Maybe the divinity behind the revelation was *Satsuki-san*!

At any rate, a week passed in the blink of an eye, and now, here we were.

“Cosplayers are all so tiny, but you’re really strong in spite of that,” I said.

I should mention that Kaho-chan and I were both dragging luggage carts, with mine borrowed from Kaho-chan. We had a ton of clothes, makeup, and accessories to haul.

“We’re particular about our body types, so a lot of us are pretty muscular,” she said.

“Are you muscular too?” I asked.

Kaho-chan giggled. She put her hands on her hips and confidently said, “Wanna arm wrestle and find out?”

“I think I’d just lose.”

Kaho-chan went up to the reception desk and told the person at the counter she had a reservation, whereupon we were taken to a waiting room-like area. It was a small, clean space with a big mirror in it, presumably where we were supposed to change our clothes and do our makeup.

By the way, it turns out that there’s a whole cultural phenomenon of doing group cosplays. That’s because, well, say you have a rival and a protagonist in series A. If you have two people acting as them, it makes series A come alive so much better. Even I could see the logic there. Having Cloud alone is all fine and dandy, but Cloud standing next to Sephiroth lets you paint that much stronger of a picture. Therefore, I’d ended up acting as a character to stand next to the one Kaho-chan wanted to dress as.

Still, I had one concern. “So, like, we’re taking photos today, right?” I asked.

Kaho-chan stopped short amid unpacking her costume. “Uh, yeah? Your point?”

“Who’s actually taking the photos? Are we going to have it on a timer function or what?”

“Hmmm, weeelll, mmmm,” she said. “We might have a few little fairies doing it for us.”

She hemmed (and hawed) so well she could have put a tailor to shame.

Hold on. I grabbed her by her thin shoulders with a desperate look.

“Wait!” I said, “Kaho-chan, who’s taking the photos? Is someone else coming?”

“That,” she said, “is a great question.” She whacked herself on the head with a cheeky little clunk and playfully giggled. “I mean, it’s a *group* photoshoot and all.”

“A…group…photo…shoot?” I broke the words down one by one. “Okay, so the word ‘group’ implies that it’s more than just the two of us.”

“Nah, but you still call it group work when you do it in pairs.”

“Well, true!” I nodded. I must have looked like I was losing my mind. Still not letting go of her shoulders, I looked deep into her eyes. “Okay, so what’s really going on?”

“Well, this week and next week—that’s two times in all—we’re gonna have a whole bunch of people come join us!” she chirped.

“Sorry, I just remembered I need to make an urgent appointment!” I cried.

As I tried to sprint away, Kaho-chan tackled me around the waist. I oofed.

“C’mon, you can’t back out now!” she said. “And, like, of course it wouldn’t be this easy. Money doesn’t grow on trees!”

“Yeah, but you never told me it’d involve all this! It’s your fault for not giving me fair warning.”

“Oh please, it’ll be fine. All you have to do is smile, and I’ll handle the rest. Now c’mon, get changed!”

“No! Freaking! Way!” I screamed and flailed. “There’s literally no freaking way I’m going to have my photo taken by a whole bunch of people!”

“But didn’t you do all that practice?” Kaho-chan said.

That made me stop short. Uggh… I mean, yes, I did put in all that effort last week… I recalled the many days of mental torture. I was awful with photography, but I’d done my very best to find an angle I looked okay in and take a bajillion selfies. I’d even thought, “Oh, I don’t look half bad here,” and almost sent them to my friends, but I’d wound up too embarrassed to show anyone and kept them all to myself instead. There was something kind of fun about taking photos in the middle of the night, though, and I ended up getting so caught up in it I stayed up too late. Then, when I saw the photos the next morning, I felt like dying just looking at them.

The memories made my limbs feel heavy. “Yeah, but I wish we could have done it with only us two, Kaho-chan…”

“Oh?” Kaho-chan put a hand to her mouth and made a sweet, startled grin. “I had no idea you liked me that much. I guess that means you gotta do your best for me, huh?”

“For you, my ass!” I retorted.

But I understood that if I ducked out of there now, Kaho-chan would tease me for the rest of my life. And that, of course, would suck. Ugh. In the end, it all really came down to that. My sheer stubbornness won out over my embarrassment. Ugggggh.

“But I mean, I feel like it’d be rude to the camera person to make them photograph me, of all people,” I said. “The height of insolence, if you will. What’ll I do if I shatter their expensive lenses?”

“Uh, I think that goes beyond beating yourself up and ends up in crime territory…” Kaho-chan folded her arms. “Okay, fine. I guess I gotta bust out the compliment strategy if I wanna take advantage of you.”

I didn’t fully get what she meant, but she knew I could totally hear her, right?

“You know, Rena-chin,” Kaho-chan said. “I have to say, you’re plenty conventionally attractive, honest. You’re totally a cute teen girl.”

“Huh?” I said. “Really?”

“The fact that you clearly think I’m lying to you is pissing me off all over again.”

I’d been aiming to be an extraordinarily average cookie-cutter copy of a high school girl, but forget being flattered. All I felt was embarrassed when someone called me cute. Well, but my sister was pretty cute, come to think of it. Since I had the same genes, couldn’t that mean, theoretically speaking, that I was cute too?

But no! A good eighty percent of a girl’s attractiveness came down to her hair, her facial expressions, her gestures, her makeup, and her overall vibe. I couldn’t cut it as a cute girl if I came across as an antisocial loser and was fundamentally anti-cute.

But no again! I had, after all, been trying so hard to de-antisocial-loser myself. Plus, both Mai and Ajisai-san had called me cute. Okay, but they both belonged in the camp of people who’d squeal over weird, ugly corporate mascots, so maybe that didn’t count.

“Ugh, I can’t take it anymore!” Kaho-chan yelled, yanking me out of the mental quicksand I was sinking into. She pulled a five yen coin from her pocket and ran a thread through it. “Here, Rena-chin. Look at this.”

“Uh, okay…?”

Kaho-chan let out a deep breath and then, with a serious expression, began to swing the coin back and forth. “Youuuu are geeeettiiing vveeeryy preeetttyyy… Youuuuu are geeeettinnng veeeryyy prettttttyy.”

“You really need to cut it out with the ancient tricks already!” I cried.

Her self-taught hypnotism had zero effect on me. I mean, what else would you expect?

Once we finished getting ready, we left the studio right on time and bumped into three people at the front desk. They were our photographers, and were all women, which came as a slight relief. Okay, not really. I was still entirely on edge.

“Ooh, thank you all so much for coming!” Kaho-chan—or Nagipo-chan, rather—waved as she called to them in a bright, chipper voice, decked out in her cosplay. “It’s super-duper great to see you, Miharu-

san, Emma-san, and Perman-san!"

When the three women saw her, they squealed. "Oh my god!" went one. "Nagipo-chan, you're adorable! You are just the cutest."

"I've been so excited waiting to see you unveil this new costume," another gushed. "It's so good! Ten billion points for you!"

"Ohhh my god, you are just too cute," the last said. "Thank you so much. You are literally doing me a favor by being alive. Thank you so, so much. Oh god, I love you, Nagipo-san."

They were *really* hyped… But they had a point. Nagipo-chan was as lovely as a fairy who'd stepped straight out of the world of her anime. Sure, Kaho-chan was cute on a normal basis too, but this felt fundamentally different.

Today, she and I were dressed as maids from the popular show *Anima Meido*. It was a cutesy story featuring lots of girls who dressed up as animal maids. The costumes were super cute, and it'd gone down amazingly with guys and girls alike all over the world. The story was, surprisingly, a real tearjerker too, which generated a lot of buzz as well. Among the main four characters in the show, Kaho-chan was cosplaying the cat girl who was super good at using her puppy-dog eyes to get her way, and I was the flirtatious, kind-of-a-hot-mess bunny girl who thought she was the cutest in the cast. I feel like her personality could not have been more opposite to mine, but I guess out of everyone in the quintet, I was the closest to resembling her in looks.

Still, I wasn't sure how well this would turn out. Wouldn't me dressing as her be sacrilege against the character? Wouldn't the photographer ladies be upset?

As I fretted, Nagipo-chan introduced me. "This is my partner for today's shoot!" she said. "She's one of my besties."

"I'm, uh, Renakoala," I said, coming up with the name on the spot and then bowing with great vigor. "It's nice to meet you."

It was like the photographers turned into completely different people. They all bowed back and said, "Nice to meet you," totally politely. They gave off such a working adult vibe I couldn't handle it.

"All righty then," Nagipo-chan said, "let's not let all the money I spent booking the studio go to waste. Ready to get started?"

She pumped her fist in the air, and her legion of troops responded

with a more subdued fist pump and an “Okay!”

According to what Nagipo-chan told me before we got started, these three were her financial whales and constant support. But beyond just being willing to shell out cash for her, they were all well behaved and took good photos, making them perfect for my cosplay debut. Wait, but wasn’t that extra reason not to do them such a disservice? I froze stiff with worry, like one of those figurines with unbendable limbs.

Two of the camerawomen, each toting cameras with enormous lenses, started to take shots of Nagipo-chan, squealing away and generally having a grand old time. The other one turned to me. “You look so good,” she said. “I’m a huge fan of Rina Bun, you know. That’s why I knew I had to be here when I heard a Rina Bun was coming today!”

Rina Bun, by the way, was the bunny girl I was dressed as.

“Oh. No, I mean. Um,” I said.

“Renakoala-san, you look exactly like Rina Bun. Did you make the costume yourself?”

As my tongue tied itself in knots, Nagipo-chan came to my rescue from afar. “I made that one too!” she called. “Right, Rena-koa?”

“R-right,” I repeated.

“Wow, that’s so cool.” said the photographer. “I love Nagipo-chan’s energy. She brings a new costume to every event, and that makes it so much fun to follow her.”

She giggled in an elegant way. She was so neat and tidy that she reminded me of an announcer lady, but the camera slung around her neck like a bazooka made it seem like she’d just stepped off the battlefield. It unnerved me all over again.

“Do you have a social media account already, Renakoala-san?” the photographer asked.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Not yet.”

“Wow, then you really are a beginner, huh? That’s exciting. Let’s make this a good time today, then, okay?”

The lady smiled and then pointed her camera at me. I smiled back as stonily as if I were faced with Medusa herself. “P-please go easy on me,” I said.

I'll be fine, I'll be fine, I'll be fine, I told myself. I mean, just think how much I'd practiced at home. How many hundreds of selfies had I taken at this point? There wasn't a huge difference between taking a selfie and having someone else take a photo of me. I'd be fine. *Buck up, Renako. Excuse me, I mean Renakoala.*

Right. I was a cosplayer now, which meant I had to become the character inside and out. If Rina Bun were here, she'd smile prettily, strike a pose that would melt the hearts of boys and girls alike, and chirp, "Make sure you do a super-duper good job of capturing cute li'l me on film, m'kay? You'd better treasure it too!"

Right, and since I was Rina Bun right now, I had to do the same!

So I giggled awkwardly and asked, "U-uh, is this, uh…okay…?" There wasn't even an inkling of confidence in my pose, and I was such a bad imitation of her that I put myself to shame.

Sure, the lady was nice enough to go, "You look great! Okay, say cheese," and take my photo, but I don't know, man… I knew better than anyone that I was doing a piss-poor job.

It made no difference no matter how much she giggled and went, "You must be nervous, huh? It's okay. You can relax." The problem all came down to the fact that she was photographing me, of all people. Even when the photographers switched out, and when Nagipo-chan joined me for a group shot, I continuously, perpetually, incessantly performed awfully.

Nagipo-chan told me to take a break, and I went to go sit in a chair in the corner of the studio and fall headlong into a depressive slump.

"It must be nerve-racking to have your first-ever shoot, huh?" the first photographer lady said.

"Huh?" I said. "Oh, uh."

She handed me a plastic bottle of warm milk tea. The calendar still said it was summer, but the skimpy clothing made me feel pretty chilly, so I appreciated her thoughtfulness.

I forced myself to smile in order to not make the mood any more awkward than it already was. "Th-thanks. Um, are you sure you don't want to go take more photos?"

Nagipo-chan was still carrying on with the photoshoot on her own. The ladies crowding around her looked like they were having the time of their lives.

"I'm a little tired from lugging this camera around all the time. Mind if I sit next to you and take a break?" the photographer lady asked.

"Nah, of course not. Help yourself."

If Rina Bun were here, I bet she would have smiled cutely and said, "Well, aren't you a lucky duck to get cute li'l me allll to yourself?" But the best I could do was feel apologetic that she had to keep me company.

"Nagipo-san has been bringing another pretty girl along with her lately," the photographer told me, "so I keep thinking about how you two capture the cuter, friendlier side of *Anima Meido* so well."

"You mentioned a pretty girl? Is that Moon-san, by any chance?"

"Oh, so you know her too, huh? Yes, I was talking about Moon-san. I don't think she's done much cosplay either, but she has a sort of… *presence*, I guess you could say. She's so good at commanding the space. She's practically a pro."

I laughed weakly. "Yeah, Moon-san's incredible."

If Satsuki-san were in my shoes, she probably would have jumped into this just as far as I did and then captured everyone's attention in the blink of an eye. I mean, I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd modeled with Mai before. She was that freaking gorgeous, so I'm sure there must have been plenty of demand for her as a model.

"Sorry you got stuck with me today instead," I said.

"Oh, don't be like that," said the photographer lady. "You're the only one who could pull off this cosplay, aren't you? I'm happy I got to see you."

I mean, I wasn't too sure about that. I felt anyone could have worn this costume. Wait, no, no, no. I was making it all weird and awkward again. I had to pick something to talk about!

"Uh, hey, have you been a fan of Nagipo-san for a while?" I asked.

"Oh ho, what a good question. That really brings me back," she said. "Yes, I'm an old fan. Back then, she was TweenCosplayer, and

once I saw her talent, I was hooked. I've been following her ever since and never looked back."

"So, is Nagipo-san really…that good?"

The lady looked like she wasn't entirely clear on where I was going with this.

"Yeah, I would say so," she said. "I think she's incredible. She makes her own costumes, and it's obvious how much research she puts into the makeup. Plus, she's always polite to her photographers and is great at interacting with the fans. But I think my favorite part is that you can tell just how much she loves the series she cosplays."

"Gotcha. That makes sense."

In the world of the studio, Nagipo-chan stood out like a popstar. When I considered how she used to be on my level, I couldn't help but feel the world of difference between us. But I mean, of course there was that difference. While Nagipo-chan had been working her butt off, I hadn't done anything.

The photographer lady looked at her too and remarked quietly, "But you know… I get the sense that she's been brooding over something recently. From what I can tell, she only just managed in the nick of time to find a partner for this photoshoot, even. But you know, we photographers wouldn't have minded doing a solo shoot like the ones she used to put on."

"Uh, does that mean…?"

"Oh, no, I'm just saying what I've noticed, that's all!" The photographer lady laughed quickly. "I feel like I can see what's going on inside her mind when I look through the viewfinder, you know? Wait, that must sound creepy." She laughed again.

I didn't say anything. Maybe she was right. Maybe Kaho-chan really was preoccupied with something, but I doubt she'd tell me if I asked. She wouldn't talk to me, not when I couldn't even handle other people taking a darn photo of me.

I had it wrong sometimes. I thought that everyone else but me was living a good life, working hard, and had nothing to worry about at all. But that wasn't true. Even Ajisai-san and Satsuki-san (and of course Kaho-chan) had issues, but they carried on making progress even while nursing their own painful feelings. Maybe the same could even be said

for Mai.

"Um, hey…" I said. "I'm sorry about today. I know I did a really bad job this time, but…" I put my hand to my heart and looked straight at the photographer. "Next time, I'll—well, I don't actually know if I'll be here next time—but I'll try really hard to do better. I promise!"

The photographer looked a bit startled, but then she broke out into a grin. "That face you just made," she said, "was perfect. I wish I'd caught it on camera."

At any rate, that's how our two-hour photoshoot ended in no time flat. Nagipo-chan was adorable and dazzling from start to finish.

***

"I'm really sorry for my performance," I told Kaho-chan.

"Nah, don't be."

After the shoot was over, we packed up our stuff and took the train back to Kaho-chan's place. Now I prostrated myself on her bedroom floor in a deep bow.

"Everyone had fun seeing Renakoala-chan still wet behind the ears," Kaho-chan added.

"But that's only because all those photographers happened to be so nice. I completely failed at all the actual photography stuff."

"Nah. You're just being way too serious about this." Kaho-chan sat cross-legged on her chair with her chin in her hands. "I didn't think we'd actually get this far, so I guess it's kinda my fault too. I s'pose we'll have to figure out some way to manage this by next week."

"Right…"

While it was all too simple to go, "Yeah, sorry. Not happening. There's no freaking way I can have my photo taken! (No 'unless…' this time!)" I'd already gotten carried away and told the camera lady I'd give it my best shot.

"But I mean, I can't pull off a major change by next week," I said. "I've been shy as heck all sixteen years I've been alive, so that's not about to change now." Not in a mere seven days, of course, unless I developed total amnesia.

I sat up properly on the carpet and looked up at Kaho-chan. “How’d you end up so good in front of a camera now anyway?”

Kaho-chan pulled a wry smile. “Oh, me? Well, I was pretty nervous at the start, as you can probably imagine. I’d get changed at the venues without a friggin idea of what I was doing, and then I’d just stand around with my heart going a mile a minute. And then people just took a bunch of pictures of me, y’know?”

“Huh.”

“It was really freaky ’cause I didn’t know anyone. Still, I felt like, ‘I’m really doing it! I’m wearing a costume in public for the first time!’ and I got so excited I just kinda rode it out on that feeling. I doubt that’d work for you, though, since you’re only in it for the money.”

“Urgh.”

I mean, sure, I had fun cosplaying too, but I guess I had bigger fundamental issues.

“Still, I think I have an idea about what to do,” she said.

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah, but I dunno if it’ll work. But it can’t hurt to give it a shot, y’know?”

I nodded over and over. I didn’t want a repeat of today. I felt bad that Kaho-chan pitied me for it, but I felt even worse when it started to make me hate myself even further. So I wanted to think, even mistakenly, that I had what it took to pull this off too!

“Sure!” I said. “I’ll do anything I can!”

“Anything, she says,” Kaho-chan teased. “Then I guess I gotta go all out and work my magic on you!”

“Your magic?” I repeated. Was Kaho-chan actually a cute little witch?

“I’m the kinda girl who gets things done, no matter what it takes,” she said.

“Freaky.”

“Nah, nah, nah, you’ll be fine.” She held her thumb and index finger a few centimeters apart. “I’m just gonna break your brain a *teensy* bit.”

“Um, freaky!”

I know I said anything, but I didn’t actually *mean* anything! Anything that left lasting after-effects was off the table, thank you very much.

Kaho-chan cackled and gave me a glare of disdain. “I dub this: the Rena-chin Raising Project!”

***

That night, Kaho-chan sent me an audio file with an attached list of notes.

Use with headphones.

Use before bed.

Best when used in a calm, dark room while falling asleep.

Yeesh, that was ominous. Oh well, I’d be fine. Even if I was total trash whose self-esteem had plummeted to the lowest point it’d been since the start of high school, I was still capable of listening to a couple of audio files.

After dinner and a bath, I climbed into bed and put my headphones on. The file was twenty minutes long, and I wondered what on earth it could be. Heart thundering in my chest all the while, I hit play.

To my surprise, I heard a sweet, gentle voice cooing:

“Ooh, Reeena-chin.”

I automatically hit pause and jerked upright. Uh, what? What in the world was that? My heart rate galloped. The shock factor of hearing such an enchantingly endearing voice was off the charts. It’s crazy how much someone could flip out just from hearing their own name. Wait, but…that had sounded like Kaho-chan, right?

I gulped, readied myself, and then slowly pressed play one more time.

"Ooh, it's okay, Rena-chin. You're soooo cute."

"You look so cute in everything you wear. You're the cutest person in the whole, wide world. You make everyone's heart skip a beat just from looking at you."

"I love you so, so much. Oh, and I'm not the only one. Eeeeveryone, boys and girls both, is totally gaga over you."

"Hey, Renako? My cute, cute Renako? C'mon, relax. We all love you lots, Renako. We love you so, so much. We adore you. You're so, so popular, y'know. C'mon, take a deep breath in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Ooh, good job, you did it! I'm so proud of you, my cute, cute Renako. You know, I love you sooo much."

And it just kept going. I lay there in bed with headphones on in the dark, dripping sweat as my heart pounded away. She was trying to hypnotize me!

When Monday rolled around two days later, I grabbed Kaho-chan the second she walked into class.

"Hey, Kaho-chan, what the heck was that all about?" I demanded.

"Huh? You mean the audio files? What, didn't you listen to them?"

"Oh, I did all right. Right before bed, just like you said."

"Cool. *Ooh, good job, you did it, Rena-chin!*"

"Gah!"

I clapped my hands to my ears and lurched back. What was that just now? It'd felt like an electric current had just run from my ears to my brain.

Kaho-chan gave me an evil "Ah ha! I see it's working" kind of smirk.

"Wh-what did you do?" I demanded. "Also, how did you even make those things?"

“I recorded ’em real quick and then did a little audio editing on them. I had a phase where I was thinking about taking up streaming, and I have a pretty decent setup from that.”

“Jeez, Kaho-chan, you can do anything.”

Kaho-chan patted me on the shoulder. “’Kay ’kay. Remember to listen to those every day, to and from school and before bed, you hear me?”

“Now you’re making me listen to them more?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll send new ones once I come up with more ideas.”

What on earth she had in mind, I had no clue, but I didn’t really think listening to her voice every day would have any sort of effect. Fundamentally speaking, simply listening to a handful of audio files wasn’t enough to bolster a person’s self-esteem. If that was all it took, wouldn’t it be too easy? All this talk of breaking my brain was exaggerated nonsense.

Still, it was Kaho-chan’s idea, so I’d play along. All it meant was switching from the music I normally listened to over to Kaho-chan’s whispering voice.

I must have made a weird face, because Kaho-chan gave me a thumbs-up and a grin. “C’mon, trust me! It’s not gonna work unless you have faith in me, right? Here, say it back to me. Everything I say is one hundred percent true. I’m a god, basically.”

“Yeah, no. At that point, you’re just being delusional. No freaking way!”

And then, before I knew it, Kaho-chan took over my daily life.

***

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday passed one after the other.

“I sure am getting a lot of files,” I said to myself as I lay in bed one night, wireless Bluetooth earbuds in and connected to my phone on which I scrolled through the selection of options.

In the *super star Rena-chin* series, I was an idol and Kaho-chan was a fan giving me her zealous support. The goal? To improve my self-esteem.

In the *cosplayer Rena-chin* series, beginner cosplayer Kaho-chan (who'd only been dressing up for one month) sang the praises of me, a legendary cosplayer. The goal? To improve my self-esteem. I had to say, I think Kaho-chan had the makings of a script writer.

Then we got into the racier ones with the *beloved pet Rena-chin* series. In this, I was Kaho-chan's pet who she doted on with lavish affection. Since it gave me unconditional love and praise for doing nothing but existing, this, too, was to raise my self-esteem.

From there, Kaho-chan started going off the rails. Her pièce de résistance was the *emotionally unstable abusive boyfriend Rena-chin and the girl who will never ever stop loving her no matter how much Rena-chin beats her so please please don't leave her* series. I don't think I need to go into this one any further, but, oddly enough, it also raised my self-esteem. Maybe it was because it was telling me that there was someone out there who wouldn't leave me, no matter how shitty I was.

On top of all that, I also added the standard *Ooh, I love you so much, Rena-chin* series into the rotation and listened to these files in my spare time over the course of a week, with the effect of…well, not much, really. I was the same as ever.

"Good night," I mumbled to my empty room. Kaho-chan's aphrodisiacal voice still played in my earbuds. Even its nectar slowly drip, drip, dripping into my brain couldn't make a difference.

Well, I mean, duh. I had deep-set Problems, okay? Sure, any ordinary girl might fall for Kaho-chan's tactics, but Kaho-chan had misjudged the depths of my loser-hood. Well, that was only to be expected. After all, I'd been faking being outgoing and happy this whole time. Honestly, I suddenly felt bad for Kaho-chan. The least I could do at this point was humor her until the end of this experiment. But man… it really would have been nice if just listening to her voice could max out my self-esteem meter and turn me into some kind of super-Renako.

***

It was Friday when I got up the next morning. I bit back a yawn as I set off for the bathroom. My sister barged in while I was still taking my sweet time fixing my hair. She always got up later than I did, but she had the knack of getting ready and leaving before me.

“Are you still at it, Oneechan?” she asked.

“Yeah, give me a sec,” I said. “This one cowlick is being a pain in the butt.”

Our bathroom was always a traffic jam in the morning. Haruna sighed in disgust and grabbed her toothbrush. “You always take forever. Every. Single. Morning. And you don’t even look that different when you’re done!”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “Doesn’t matter, though, ’cause I’m cute no matter what.”

“Uh-huh. It doe—wait, what?!”

I subdued the last of my stubborn bedhead and clipped my bangs back with a barrette. There, that would have to do.

My sister looked at me, toothbrush forgotten in her mouth, like I was a corpse that had just risen from the dead.

“What?” I asked.

“Uh…nothing…?”

“Huh? You’re weird.”

After I ate breakfast, I called my goodbyes and then set out. Late summer was gradually giving way to fall. It was sunny today, but cool, and you know what? I felt like today was gonna turn out pretty great!

***

I happened to bump into Satsuki-san at the school gates. She was pretty easy to find, fortunately, being so beautiful she stood out from a mile away no matter where she went.

I raised a hand in greeting. “Heya, Satsuki-san! How’s it hanging, bestie?”

“Good morning…” she said. “Are you ill, by any chance?”

I dashed up to walk alongside her, only to be greeted by that sudden retort for my troubles. I had no clue what would make her think that, so I opened my eyes wide and asked, “Huh? Why’dja say that?”

“Ah, no reason in particular. I only thought you seemed so jovial that perhaps you were delirious with fever.”

“You’re a weirdo, Satsuki-san,” I said. “But I guess that’s what I like aboutcha, huh?”

I held a hand to my mouth and giggled, and Satsuki-san knitted her brows together in alarm. What?

“What…in the world?” she said. “What’s the matter, Amaori? Did you have an exorcism? What happened to the black cloud of gloom that always follows you around?”

I cocked my head in confusion at this puzzling Satsuki-ism. “I dunno what you’re talking about,” I said. “Oh hey, the weather’s great today, don’tcha think? I just have this feeling that, like, something awesome’s gonna happen. Plus, I met my best friend Satsuki-san first thing in the morning, so that’s gotta be another point for good luck.”

Satsuki-san looked repulsed. “You’re disgusting me…”

“What? How?!”

We changed our shoes and then went to class. Satsuki-san clutched her temples like she was developing a headache. I was kind of worried for her.

“Are you feeling a li’l under the weather, Satsuki-san?” I asked.

“Yes. I mean, no, but… Oh, never mind. I’m fine. Whatever’s up with you is none of my business. I’m perfectly happy living my peaceful, ordinary life, thank you very much.”

“I mean, yeah, peaceful and ordinary are both good things,” I agreed. “They say too much stress is bad for the skin. I mean, it could even mess with me, and we all know I’m always a catch.”

She whacked me on the head.

“What was that for?!” I cried.

“It was a reflex.” Satsuki-san stared in surprise at her own hand. What, had I really said something that bad? It sounded pretty normal to me.

“Are you truly going to be acting like this from now on?” she demanded. “Are you sure? I would like you to consider how it might bother other people. Please, I could really do without this new, nightmarish personality.”

“I’m literally just being my normal self!” I protested, puffing my cheeks out in a pout. To make my point, I grabbed Satsuki-san’s arm. “You’re being such a big meanie, Satsuki-san! Think about how much I love you!”

“Hey! Whoa, watch it—”

And as we bantered back and forth like the good pals we were, I heard a huge thump from behind me. I turned around, and there was Ajisai-san with her backpack on the ground.

She pointed a quivering finger at me. “Wh-wh-why are you holding her arm?” she shrieked.

“Heya, Ajisai-san!” I called. I let go of Satsuki-san’s arm and grabbed Ajisai-san’s hand instead. She squeaked. “Ohemgee, you look soooo pretty today!”

“H-hello to you too… Wh-what’s going on…?” Ajisai-san instantly turned bright red. She looked *ah-dorbs*. “What’s wrong, Rena-chan? Why are you so. Um.”

“Huh? C’mon, Ajisai-san, you’re always super touchy-feely too.”

“I mean, maybe, but…?”

She picked up her backpack again and looked to Satsuki-san for help, but Satsuki-san only shrugged her shoulders coolly.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she said. “I think Amaori might be horribly drunk.”

“H-how could you, Rena-chan!” Ajisai-san cried. “Drinking is for adults!”

Of course I wasn’t drunk, those silly billies. I tilted my head to one side and giggled. “You guys’re acting kinda cuckoo, don’tcha think?”

Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san shouted in chorus, “No, you are!” and “Rena-chan, you’re the cuckoo one!”

***

“I never expected it to go so well,” Kaho-chan said. “My talent’s a thing to be feared.”

The two of us sat side by side on a bench in the courtyard during lunch break, although we were both done eating. She looked down at the palm of her hand, like a cyborg that had just killed a human being on accident.

“Uh, what’re you talking about?” I asked.

“The tactics to boost your self-esteem. Duh.”

“But I don’t feel any different.”

“That’s okay, Rena-chin,” she said. “That’s what everyone says when they’ve had their brain broken.”

“I’m terrified to consider how you would know that.”

See? I could still retort appropriately whenever anyone brought up something weird, and I could carry on an ordinary conversation perfectly. My brain most certainly wasn’t broken.

“Just curious,” Kaho-chan said. “How cute do you think you are, Rena-chin?”

“Huh?”

I mean, actually saying it out loud was embarrassing as heck. And this sounded like a good way to ruin our relationship, you know?

“About the same as anyone else, I guess,” I said.

“About the same, huh? Interesting. A very modest response. Okay, let’s change the question up a bit. If you were gonna rank everyone in the class, where do you think you’d fall?”

“Okay, this is even more likely to ruin our relationship!”

Kaho-chan nodded to herself. “Gotcha. So your reasoning’s still operational, huh? Well, no biggie. That’ll actually make you easier to deal with. Believe me, I’m not trying to make a peppy, perky monster over here.”

“What in the world are you going on about?” I asked.

“Nothing, just talking to myself. ’Kay, let’s nail down our plans for tomorrow.”

And here it was: the photography shoot round 2. My last failure replayed in my mind.

I looked down, not feeling all that confident. “I hope I can be helpful this time around, but…I haven’t done anything different this past week. Sure, I’ve been listening to your audio files every day, but that’s basically nothing.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Kaho-chan made a fist with great vigor. “You’re *cute enough* to pull it off as is!”

YOU’RE CUTE ENOUGH TO PULL IT OFF! You’re cute enough to pull it off. You’re cute enough to pull it off…

As the words echoed in my ears, I felt a heavy shock run through my body like something had crashed into my skull. Oh god, my head. Was she right? Was I cute?

Even as Kaho-chan sat right in front of me, another Kaho-chan leered at me and whispered, *“That’s right. Rena-chin, you’re super-duper cute.”* The protruding fang from her mouth made her seem almost like a young, sexy vampire come to suck my blood and make me her fawning victim.

“Of course everyone will love you,” she said. “After all, they get to take photos of such a cute girl. C’mon, use your head. That’s a total win for the camera crew, right?”

“Well, true,” I said. “Since I am so cute…after all…?”

I was starting to very gradually feel more positive about this. Yeah, of course people would love to get a chance to see me in all my cuteness. Plus, given how cute I was on a daily basis, me in a cute cosplay would be next-level, a total cuteness overload.

“Huh?” I said. “Wait, then how come last time was such a flop? I mean, aren’t I eternally and invincibly cute?”

“Pssh, don’t sweat the small stuff,” Kaho-chan said. “You’re too cute for all that.”

“I’m…cute…? No, no, I’ve been trying all this time to be considered an average girl, so…wait, what? Am I actually not that cute?”

My vision was spinning.

Kaho-chan cupped her hand around her mouth and whispered, “C’mon, don’t overthink it. *You’re cute, Rena-chan. You’re my little cutie-patootie doggo-woggo, aren’tcha? Who’s a good girl? Who’s a good girl?*”

She tousled my hair and rubbed me under the chin. I barked at her.

“Uh-huh? Ohh, you’re so cute. You’re a li’l cutie-wutie! Rena-chin, you’re the cutest in the world!”

“Oh!” I gasped. I returned to my senses mere moments before I could start nuzzling my head into Kaho-chan’s chest. I had the sneaking suspicion that, for a second there, I’d been only moments away from chucking all human dignity out the window.

But she was right. What on earth was I worried about? I was adorable just existing, so obviously people would be happy seeing me at a photoshoot. Psh! It was practically charity on my part to show up.

Kaho-chan, for no reason I could fathom, muttered to herself, “I guess this off-the-cuff stuff is pretty weak. No surprises there, really. If anything, it’s a frickin’ miracle it works at all. Well, who cares? So long as it holds until tomorrow, that’s good enough for me.”

Then she smiled at me. “I just asked you for your looks, so long as

we've got that, we're good to go! I mean, I'm not asking for your pride as a cosplayer, a perfect pose, or a fetching facial expression, y'know?"

"I see," I said. "Well, I'm fairly confident I can deliver in the looks department…emphasis on the fairly."

"Sweet!"

I had the odd feeling that she was telling me something awful, but I knew that couldn't be true. I mean, Kaho-chan was my sweet owner, so there was no way she'd ever do that. She always showered her Rena doggo-woggo with attention, and I loved her for that!

"Okay, now let's go out and rock this thing tomorrow!" Kaho-chan said. "'Cause we gotta show the world just how cute you are!"

"Yeah!" I pumped my fist.

Sure, my mind felt foggy as all heck, but I was happy enough, so I'd be fine!

And thus, Koyanagi Kaho most aptly guided Amaori Renako into a state of hypnosis—or perhaps one might say total brainwash.

***

The second group photography shoot was that upcoming Saturday. Amaori Renako came back from the bathroom with a solemn frown and, upon reaching the waiting room, listlessly slumped over the table. Her earbuds were planted firmly in her ears; she'd listened to Kaho's hypnosis audio files the whole way here.

Koyanagi Kaho turned from the mirror where she'd been doing her makeup and absentmindedly muttered to herself, "I guess it's like that thing where athletes get focused before matches by listening to music."

Renako didn't hear her.

Kaho thought back to the events of last week. It struck her as odd that Renako had been that shy around strangers; as far as Kaho could remember, Renako had always been the type to strike up a conversation with anyone. Even the teachers at cram school loved her. If anyone was going to be nervous around strangers, Kaho thought, it should have been herself.

Back then, she had no other friends apart from Renako and didn't even have much of a desire to make other friends. *I mean, even now, I don't have any other otaku friends,* she reminded herself. Bringing up her interests in conversation was daunting, and doubly so given the popularity she enjoyed in high school. Even opening up to Satsuki had been nerve-racking. *Saa-chan couldn't care less about what anyone else does,* Kaho-chan thought, *and even then, I only barely managed to tell her.* Looking back on it now, Satsuki was a rare sort of person indeed. There was no end to her grumbling, sure, but she took the job seriously once the cameras were trained on her. She was a professional to the core. *Well, there were those times when I tried to get her to wear skimpier stuff and she whacked me on the head with her book,* Kaho corrected herself. Those requests hadn't been motivated by any baser instincts; it was simply that Satsuki was particularly suited for characters Kaho couldn't pull off herself. Kaho envied her for that, but that was all.

Satsuki wasn't unique in that regard either. Kaho was convinced that Ajisai, Mai, and even Renako had the makings of great cosplayers. Everyone in the quintet simply had that certain *it* about them. *Or that's what I used to think,* Kaho thought. *But now I'm not so sure.*

She looked at the girl currently doing an impression of a puddle of slime stuck to the table and groaned. Amaori Renako. In Kaho's eyes, Renako was a pretty and charming young woman, the more grown-up version of the girl from long ago. *Oh, Amaori-san,* Kaho thought. The fact that she was here again now almost moved Kaho to wax sentimental.

No, she reminded herself. *We're right before a big show. I need to focus purely on what I can do to make this shoot a success.*

She sidled up to Renako. "It's almost time to go live," Kaho said. "You holding up okay?"

Shoulders swaying, Renako creaked upright like a rusty door opening. "Sorry, Kaho-chan…"

"Huh?"

This did not bode well. Kaho-chan's voice didn't have hypnotic qualities after all. Plus, she'd only recorded and sent off the latter half of them for the sheer fun of it anyway.

Renako drooped. "I know it's your big day and all, but I just… Kaho-chan, I'm too cute. The photographers are gonna be so focused on me that they won't look at you."

"Wait, that's your concern?" Kaho-chan yelped.

"I'm really sorry," Renako said. "Hey, do you think it's a crime to be this adorable? I probably should sit this one out, then. I don't want to make things all awkward again with you."

Renako buried her face in her hands, tormented by the thought of her overabundant beauty. "I should have been born a harbor. Then I'd actually have a use for a face that could launch a thousand ships. At this rate, everyone in the whole world'll fall in love with me. If only I were you, Kaho-chan. I bet you'd enjoy being this loved!"

"I can't even follow where you're going with this humblebrag anymore."

Yup, she was still Renako all right, but implanting the "I'm too cute" message in her caused some sort of major internal contradiction. If this dragged on much longer, Kaho-chan wondered, would it *actually* break her mind?

"C'mon, Rena-chin," she said. "It's about time to get changed and put your makeup on."

“When I’m already this cute? And you’re telling me to make myself even cuter?!”

Kaho grabbed Renako as she made her pessimistic protests and forced her to get changed. Being a cosplayer newcomer, Renako would have had a hard time managing to get it all just right on her own, so Kaho helped out. Once the clothes were on, the next step was to fix her contours. Kaho pulled a roll of lift-up tape from her bag, a standard item in the cosplayer’s tool kit. It provided a great way to alter facial features or artificially create slanted eyes by tugging on the flesh. After putting a hairnet on Renako, Kaho taped her up until she resembled an anime character with a small, attractive face.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Renako complained. “Hey, Kaho-chan, don’t you think this is too strong?”

“That’s ’cause I chose this brand for its awesome sticking power. Suck it up, Rena-chin. You know what people say: spare the curling rod, spoil the child.”

“Well, true.”

Renako shut her mouth and entered Super Suck-It-Up mode. It was incredible, Kaho thought. So long as you told Renako she was attractive, you might be able to get her to do anything. Had she known, Kaho would have tried to get her to wear something even skimpier.

She used a skin-safe glue on Renako’s bangs to attach them to her face in a way that matched the hairstyle. Once the heavy-duty work was done, she decided to let Renako handle the rest of her makeup and went off to do her own. Finally, she touched up Renako’s makeup, and then the process was complete. Two fetching maids were born.

Renako looked into the mirror, clutched her chest, and collapsed on the spot with a groan.

“What’s wrong, Rena-chin?!” Kaho-chan yelped.

“I’m sorry, Kaho-chan…” Renako said. “I just couldn’t contain myself when I looked in the mirror and saw how horribly cute I was. You know, I think I might have just caught a celeb crush on myself. Is that what this feeling is? Love?”

“Ah. Okay.”

Kaho was unaware of this, but the fact that Renako stubbornly refused to admit her feelings to Mai and Ajisai both—*and yet experienced*

love for the first time by falling for herself—was beyond absurd. It was almost too tragic.

Moving along, Renako shook her head, her bunny ears swinging to and fro. “Hey, Kaho-chan,” she said, “are you sure this is a good idea? I mean, I’m so cute, people won’t be able to help falling in love with me.”

“Mmm, I don’t know about that.”

Renako blushed and huffed. “But I mean…”

“Look, Mai-Mai and Aa-chan are that cute, but they get let off the hook, right?”

“Okay, sure. But still.” Renako snuck another glance at the mirror and then blurted out, “I’m sorry, but I just don’t think they’re as cute as me. I mean, I’m talking about the big picture here. Sure, they’re better than me in a couple of ways, but I’m winning the cuteness competition overall. It is what it is, you know? I was born this way.”

“Ah. Okay.” Kaho had no words as Renako glared at her to hide her embarrassment. Kaho-chan’s first attempt at hypnosis had completely ground Renako’s dignity into the dust… Kaho’s talents were fearsome indeed.

“At this rate, everyone’s going to fall head over heels for me,” Renako said. “And I just know one of the photographers here today will have connections with a talent agency, and they’ll scout me and turn me into a superstar. Then I’ll end up with a super pretty boyfriend and turn into an overemotional, toxic wreck. I can already see it now!”

The various plotlines of Kaho-chan’s audio files were getting tangled together.

“Oh, it’s no good, Kaho-chan,” said Renako. “If people start liking me anymore than they do, I’ll have to turn all of them down. It’s too much for me. Oh, God, why on earth did you make me so adorable? Was it something I did in my past life?”

As one would expect, Kaho dearly wished to sock Renako in the face. No two ways about it, this hypnosis was too effective for its own good. But oh well.

“Eh, we can let it last until the end of the photoshoot,” she said. “Now, c’mon, Rena-chin. Let’s go show the world how adorable you are!”

She dragged Renako by the hand, but Renako cried “No!” and

shook her off. Kaho looked back at her, thinking Renako was about to cause more trouble, but something about her looked different now.

"No, I mean. You shouldn't. You. Um." She looked up at Kaho, pleading and embarrassed. "I mean, given how cute I am and all… If you take me by the hand, you're going to fall for me. You need to be careful, okay? Come on, Kaho-chan, use your head a little."

Kaho-chan groaned to herself. Then, deadpan, she said, "Perfect. That was adorable."

Renako turned bright red and screamed, "I told you, you shouldn't!"

Unlike last week's photoshoot, this one hosted far more people and lasted longer. Some of the photographers were men too, but if that made Renako nervous, Kaho-chan couldn't tell. Enough people fawned over how cute Renako was that she seemed to perk up immediately and got right into the groove of posing.

"You're such a cutie, Renakoala-san," said one of the photographers. "You're just as good as Rina Bun herself."

Renako giggled. "You think? I mean, she's nothing I can't pull off."

"I love the pose!" another squealed. "Look over here!"

"You got it!" Renako called back. "One pretty smile, coming up!"

"Aww, I love it! That line is soooo Rina Bun!"

Well, she seemed to be having a good time, so Kaho figured it wasn't worth sweating over. The photographers were having a blast with Renako too. Confidence really was key to any sort of undertaking, Kaho supposed. Still, she was concerned someone might say, "You'd look cuter without that layer on you, you know," and Renako would take it as her cue to strip down to her birthday suit. Oh well. It looked like a private wrap party wasn't going to be a thing after all, but them's the breaks, Kaho-chan thought as she walked over to Renako. She'd begged Renako to participate, after all, so it was her duty to keep Renako safe as well.

"All righty, Renakoala-chin!" she chirped. "Next up, let's get a group shot!"

“Wait, what?” Renako said.

“Liiiike this!”

Kaho hugged Renako tight, making Renako turn bright red and squeal. The crowd oohed, and all the cameras flashed at once.

“D-don’t you think this is a little overboard?” Renako protested.

“It’s anime,” Kaho said. “They do things like this all the time.”

“W-well, true, but… Ugh, I dunno…” She lowered her voice to a whisper so only Kaho could hear. “You need to watch out, Kaho-chan. Remember what I said earlier?”

The audience was eating it up, so she pressed her chest closer to Renako’s.

“You don’t have to cling to me so hard,” Renako muttered.

“Why not? You gotta problem with it?”

“Kaho-chan, you’re going to fall in love with me at this rate.”

Kaho didn’t dignify that with an answer.

“Huh?!” Renako squeaked. “Why’re you getting even closer? Wh-what’s this all about? Wait, do you really like me? I already told you no! Hands to yourself, ma’am!”

That asinine response was a huge hit with the crowd, but it also drove Kaho slightly up the wall.

***

Afterward, they took several shots of them with their faces close together or holding hands tightly and facing each other, followed by ones of Kaho hugging Renako, Renako hugging Kaho, and the two hugging each other. This anime was particularly touchy-feely with its female cast members, but there was definitely a suggestive element to doing some of these things in real life (like kissing one another on the cheek) that made Renako red as a tomato from start to finish.

All throughout, Kaho heard a string of running, delusional commentary from the girl at her side, an incessant stream of whispers in Kaho’s ear. “You’re going to fall head over heels for me,” Renako muttered. “Kaho-chan, you’re totally going to fall for me. Oh no, no, no

you shouldn't. No, no, no, stop, you're going to fall in love with me. Oh god, oh no, now you're going to love me even harder."

As she made pose after pose, Kaho thought to herself, *Forget Renako. If I heard this 24/7, I'd go nuts too.*

***

Oh god, it was finally over. I felt like I'd burnt out in a ball of white flame as I collapsed into a chair. It was already late evening by the time the two parts of this photoshoot were over and we both came back to the studio waiting room. What made today so different from last week? How had I managed to get through it? I couldn't even begin to tell you.

"Looking back on it now," I mumbled to myself as I stared off into space, "what the heck made me so bold? I was smiling left and right and posing like I really was a cute anime character."

It was unbelievable. Had someone gone and installed another personality in me?

As Kaho-chan peeled off my makeup tape, she told me, "That's the fun of cosplay, y'know? You get to turn into a whole other person."

"I get it now," I said. "So that means I turned…into…"

The drawer of my memories opened with a bang. And inside was…something so horribly embarrassing it made me avert my eyes.

"I was that bad?!" I screeched, inadvertently leaping to my feet. "Wait, Kaho-chan, hold the phone. What did I even say? I didn't, like, legit say that, right? I mean, me? Even Rina Bun wouldn't have gone that far!"

"You said you were cuter than Mai-Mai and Aa-chan," Kaho-chan chirped.

I grabbed my head and screamed fit to wake the dead. I clawed at my face painfully. "Kill me! Kill me, Kaho-chan! Take the thread of my life and snip it now!"

"Living's nice too, you know," she said.

"How the *hell* am I supposed to face either of them now?!"

I skipped the chair and instead dropped straight to the floor, where I rolled around until Kaho-chan snarled at me, “Take your costume off first!”

Eep. I stripped off my clothes and then hunkered on the chair in just my underwear. Kaho-chan took my wig and hairnet off of me, letting my hair fall back down to my shoulders in its signature look. *Ugh.*

“I guess this is the liberating power of cosplay,” I said. “Cosplay’s a magic spell that turns you into a completely different person… Frightening, frightening stuff.”

Kaho-chan crammed the costumes into the travel bag and asked, “Is that all it was? Frightening?”

I looked up slightly and pursed my lips. “I mean… It felt nice too, but, like, still…”

“Hmm.”

Kaho-chan peeled off the tape stuck to my face. The way she could change the shape of her eyes or even her whole body with her cosplay was incredible. With her expertise, Kaho-chan reminded me of Cinderella’s fairy godmother sending her off to the ball.

“Well, I guess,” Kaho-chan said. “I dunno… Uh…” She looked away from me. “I guess… Well, I’m glad to hear you feel that way.”

She said it almost like a joke, but I could tell it wasn’t. I don’t think I would have enjoyed myself as much if I’d been doing it alone either. It was fun, and kind of nostalgic, solely because Kaho-chan was here with me. Still, I felt too embarrassed to actually say that out loud.

“U-uh hey, Rena-chin?” Kaho-chan asked.

“Yeah?”

“If you ever want to give it another shot with me…” she mumbled. “Oh, never mind. Forget it. Anyway, I’m glad you had fun cosplaying!”

I groaned. “You see, my dear Kaho-chan-san, nothing is pure fun *all* of the time. Everything has its downsides. Therefore, even if I say I enjoyed it, the question of how much I enjoyed it is another story altogeth—ow!”

I glared up at her as she ripped off a strip of tape with great force.

Kaho-chan grinned and shrugged. “God, Rena-chin, you’re such a bore. It wouldn’t kill you to be a little more optimistic, y’know? Why can’t you want to cosplay forever? Like you could go around being, ‘Tee hee, I’m such a cutie-patootie!’ all the time.”

“Stooooop already!” I shook my head. “Believe me, I wish I could have more self-esteem too! But self-esteem’s not about looks. It’s about remembering all the hard work I’ve put in and gaining self-confidence.” I hugged my knees to my chest and muttered, “And besides…I’m really not that cute.”

Kaho-chan stopped in her tracks and stared at me before sighing long and loud.

“What’s that for?!” I snapped.

“Nothing. I’m just wondering whether I prefer the old you better.”

Kaho-chan stepped forward and gave my boobs a squeeze. Ack!

“Jeez!” I cried as I covered my chest. “Why do you always go straight to touching me?!”

“Here, check this out, Rena-chin.” Kaho-chan pulled out a wad of thousand-yen bills with a flourish and spread them out like a folding fan. Dollar signs popped into my eyes.

“Oh my god!” I breathed. “Money!”

“These’re all the fees people paid to take part today! And some people just wired me the money directly, so it actually comes out to more than double this. Okey-dokey, Rena-chin. Here’s your share of thirty thousand yen, as promised.”

She handed me a stack of real cash, not just color-copied paper. Even prior to this, I thought this was an awesome deal, but seeing the actual money right before my eyes made me think all over again, “Oh my god! It’s money! Real money!”

“Are you sure I can have all this?” I asked. “When I barely did anything, Nagipo-chan-san?”

“I mean, to be honest, I kinda think I’m overpaying you, but a girl never goes back on her word! Plus I guess it’s partly ’cause you’re here that we had so many people sign up to come.”

“R-really?”

“Yup. Loads more people turned up all of a sudden when I started

bringing Saa-chan along. I guess group shoots are the way to go."

"Well, I mean, that might have just been because it's Satsuki-san we're talking about…"

Don't get me wrong, Kaho-chan was cute and all, but with Satsuki-san standing next to her, Kaho-chan's cuteness and Satsuki-san's beauty offset one another in the best ways.

"Hey, wanna take a peek at Saa-chan's cosplay photos?" Kaho-chan offered.

"Yeah, for sure! So long as I don't get hit for it."

"She's not gonna know if you keep your lips zipped!"

We exchanged looks like a couple of brats and then stared at Kaho-chan's phone. Hot damn, those photos of Satsuki-san were something else. There it was, the magical girl cosplay I'd seen before. The pinnacle of beauty.

"I think my heart would explode if I saw this in person," I groaned.

"Y'know," Kaho-chan told me, "I wanted Saa-chan to wear this outfit out in the park at sunset for a pic. But she got too embarrassed to take it out of the studio and said no."

"Oh man, that would have been perfect for her."

I could totally picture magical girl Moon-san standing in a park at twilight. Any little girl who happened to pass by on the way home from school would take one look and think she was a real magical girl. Then Moon-san would give her a mystical grin, tap her finger to her lips, and whisper, "Keep this a secret, all right?" The poor little girl would have had no choice but to be obsessed with Moon-san for the rest of her life. Oh, what a devilish temptress Moon-san was!

"Anyway, that's what she looks like," Kaho-chan said. "Honestly, I'm not really in this for the money. I'm cool so long as I get enough to pay for the studio rental, the costumes, and the accessories. 'Kay, here's your share. Don't spend it all at once!"

Shwoop! The thirty thousand yen was mine.

"I'm just glad you didn't go into the red," I said. I felt bad for Kaho-chan, as she was doing this purely from her love of cosplay, whereas I was a piece of scum only in it for the money and, therefore,

overjoyed about the cash. I shoved the wad of bills away in my wallet. With this, Four-kun was one step closer to coming home to me. This whole thing had been super nerve-racking, but now that it was all over…I could admit I'd had a good time.

"You know, funnily enough, I think I might be able to pull off getting a job," I said.

"Whoa. Your self-esteem just hella jumped."

"Yeah, you're right!"

I'd tried something new, worked hard at it, and come out the other end successful. Well. Maybe? Or had I just screwed my brain up? Nah, I'd count this as a success. After all, Kaho-chan had paid me for it! Now I felt like I could do anything, and who cared if I was wrong or deluded about that? The most important thing was that I felt this way, because it gave me the courage I needed to take the first step into uncharted territory.

"Yeah. Yeah!" I said to myself. "I can make progress too."

Just then, I happened to lift my head and caught sight of Kaho-chan pausing in her cleanup to stare at me silently. Our eyes met.

"Kaho-chan?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, you sure worked hard, huh? Good job today, Rena-chin!"

"Thanks."

Right now, I feel completely emotionally fulfilled for making it through this ordeal.

After I finished helping her pack up, we leaned our bulging bags against the door. The cosplayer Nagipo-san—or rather, once more the perpetually pretty Kaho-chan—pumped her fist in the air and shouted, "Woo-hoo!"

"Huh, what was that for?"

"You know, that was a 'today was a blast' shout! A 'god, I love cosplay' woo-hoo!"

She turned and grinned at me. The thought that I'd broadened that smile even as little as a millimeter cheered me too.

"You wanna have a wrap party, Rena-chin?" Kaho-chan asked. "C'mon, let's go celebrate! It'll be my treat."

“Wait, are you sure?”

That unexpected invitation from my owner set my tail wagging. A wrap party with my classmate!

Speaking of wrap parties with classmates, we had one back in junior high after the cultural festival. People were already shunning me at that point, so after I watched most of the class set off for the party, I just went home. They would never have invited me in the first place, but it wasn’t like I’d been hoping for an invitation either. I mean, what was the point of having friends around when all you were doing was sitting and eating? Wouldn’t they just bother you when you were trying to eat in peace? It made no sense to me.

And then that night, my family and I went out to eat and, mortifyingly enough, happened to bump into my classmates at the very same diner where they were having their party. Trust me, I wasn’t jealous of them, I swear! I was going to live my whole life as a hermit anyway, so there!

So now junior high Renako muttered, “Ugh, wrap parties are lame. Isn’t it all just a bunch of people patting themselves on the back? Why go around giving kudos when we barely did anything? Blegh.”

Oh, shut it, you! I stomped the inner spiteful Renako down. *And don’t come out again, you hear me? It’s time for your spirit to move on already.*

Having banished that apparition, I sidled up to the pretty cosplayer at my side, rubbing my hands together with an ingratiating grin. “Wherever you want to go’s good with me!” I said.

Kaho-chan snickered. Fanning her stack of cash, the girl who’d make my dream come true said, “Okey-dokey! Now, let me take you away to a world of fun!”

***

Yup, it was a world of fun all right. It was a brilliant, gaudy place —a huge room with an extravagant sofa, an enormous TV, elegant mood lighting all over the place, and a gorgeous, canopied bed.

I stood rooted to the spot, my bag still in one hand. “Uh. Um. Uh.”

“Whatcha think, Rena-chin?” she asked with a smirk and a proud lift of her pointer finger. It was the same look of pride of someone introducing me to a great ramen restaurant. “This has gotta be your first time at one of these places, huh?”

“Um. Isn’t this one of those love hotel thingies?” I asked.

I mean, there was no privacy anywhere in the bathing area, the whole place oozed raunchiness, and everywhere I looked screamed that this was no normal hotel room. You even booked your room with a touchscreen at the entrance of the hotel proper so you wouldn’t have to talk to anyone, for Pete’s sake.

“Nuh-uh,” Kaho-chan said. “They don’t let minors rent rooms in love hotels. That’s why this place is billed as a regular hotel. Also, how do you know what a love hotel looks like? Have you been to one before, hmm?”

“I most certainly have not! I’ve just seen them in manga and books and stuff.”

“Oh, you’ve seen them, have you?”

I wasn’t even talking about particularly steamy books either. Love hotels just popped up in regular, sort of extreme shojo manga, okay?

Kaho-chan eventually let me off the hook, changed out of her shoes into a pair of slippers, and then stepped into the room. She set down on the glass table the plastic bag of snacks and drinks we’d picked up at a convenience store on the way here and then leaped onto the bed with a squeal.

“Y’know, I’ve always wanted to have a party at a love hotel.”

“So it *is* a love hotel!”

“Hmm?” Kaho-chan propped her head up on her elbows and gave me a teasing look of disdain. “I mean, if you don’t like it, I’m not forcing you to stick around, Rena-chin. I’ll just be having fun with my wrap party all by myself.”

I gritted my teeth. If I’d come here with Mai, I was sure I would have been protesting my head off. But this was Kaho-chan we were talking about, aka a friend. The thought of two friends acting like grown-ups and having a party in a love hotel was…well, fun as hell. Duh!

“Okay, but don’t you dare tell any of the others,” I said. “They

can't know that we had a bash in a love hotel."

"Yeah, 'cause they'd get jelly if they knew how much fun we're having without them, huh? Ooh, but if I tattled, don'tcha think that'd get Mai-Mai and Aa-chan off your back?"

"If you try, I'll show everyone all your old photos."

We both glared at each other, locked in a fruitless battle of deterrence.

Then Kaho-chan humphed and turned away. "You're gettin' pretty crafty, Rena-chin. Fine, you win. Let's not worry about that and party the night away!"

"O-okay. Yeah, sure."

I'm not sure what that was just about, but for a second there I felt swept up in the idea that a love hotel party would be fun no matter what. Eh, whatever. Swept up or no, that didn't change the fact that this would be fun.

"C'mon, get over here," Kaho-chan said, beckoning me.

I took off my shoes too and flopped onto the big bed. Oh my god, this thing was super springy. It was my first time ever being in such a big, fancy bed. Actually, scratch that—Mai's was even bigger. Oh great, now I was about to make a weird trip down memory lane.

I shook my head to drive away those thoughts. "Okay, let's get this party started, Kaho-chan!" I said.

"Uh, isn't that what we're doing?"

"Nah, nah, nah. You can't just kick off a wrap party all haphazard like this. You need to have the full ceremony where we go, 'Let the party begin!' and all."

"Rena-chin, sometimes you get hung up on the weirdest things."

I clutched my chest as that hit me completely out of left field. "Huh? N-no, I don't. At least, I don't think I do. I'm just a horribly ordinary, perfectly average, cookie-cutter copy of a teenage girl."

"Lmao."

She lmao-ed me! And I was being dead serious too!

Kaho-chan rose from the bed, got two glasses out of the cupboard, and set them on the table. She poured fizzy soda into both of them, the

glasses bubbling with foam.

"Well, if you wanna be formal, then here," she said.

"Oh, okay!"

I bounded to her side as she beckoned, almost like a faithful dog, and accepted a glass.

"Cheers!" we chorused, raising our glasses.

Oh god. I was already having fun. "Wow," I told myself. "So this is a real live wrap party!"

"Rena-chin, were you brought up in a mansion deep in the mountains where no one had any fun, like, ever?"

I opened a bag of chips on one side and then, without a word, Kaho-chan opened up the bag all the way, the sign of parties in full swing everywhere. I jolted in alarm. Had she cottoned on to the fact that I had next to no experience with parties? I hadn't even so much as shared a bag of chips with someone before. Great, now she was going to make fun of me again!

And how was I supposed to work this? How fast was I supposed to eat the chips? Should I eat a set amount and then leave the rest for Kaho-chan? No, maybe I'd be better off eating a chip every time she did. We could take turns and follow a rhythm, like pounding mochi. There we go. Pound, pause, pound, pause, pound, pause. Ack, that required too much focus!

Kaho-chan lay back on the sofa. "Hey, Rena-chin."

"Huh?! Oh, uh, yeah?"

If she was about to call me a weirdo for paying so much attention to how other people eat, then I resolved to just sit here holding my snacks and starve from here on out.

But Kaho-chan nonchalantly remarked, "You don't really shit-talk people, do you?"

"Huh…? I guess not."

"You know how it's common for girls to get together and, like, talk about the people they hate? But I've never actually heard you say anything bad about anyone before."

"Oh, well. Uh, I mean…"

I shivered. Come to think of it, I'd heard about the kind of thing Kaho-chan was talking about. There's nothing better for promoting solidarity than coming together to stand off against a common enemy. So did that mean that Kaho-chan and I, after being apart for so many years, had to giggle and gossip about the people we hated in order to become better friends?

Now suddenly faced with such a difficult mission, I gulped. "Y-yeah, good point. Uh, let me see. There's this sorta tall girl in the class next door, right? She's always giving me the death stare when we pass in the hallway. It's a little bit freaky."

Was this shit-talking? It sort of just sounded like a typical story of me being anxious.

"Oh, you mean Little Miss High Horse?" Kaho-chan asked. "Yeah, she has a bone to pick with the quintet or something."

Now that was a good nickname, I thought. Wait a sec. This wasn't the moment to get distracted. I had to get into some serious, powerful shit-talking here.

"Anyway, that's not my point," Kaho-chan said. "I wasn't trying to get you to start shit-talking people."

"Huh?"

Kaho-chan grinned as she chomped away on a potato chip. "I was just thinking it's kinda unusual, you know? Like, I'm always circulating from friend group to friend group, so I get to hear tons of girls talking all the time."

"Oh." So that was what she meant. But I didn't think there was anything particularly exceptional about my lack of hurtful gossip. "None of the girls in our group really say mean things, though."

"Saa-chan does."

"Yeah, but does that count as shit-talking?"

Everything Satsuki-san said was perfectly true, so I always felt like it was the fault of the person she was condemning, not a mark against her.

"It's less that she talks shit and more that she won't take shit," I pointed out.

"Yeah, for real!" Kaho-chan laughed, and that made me feel loads

better.

“I also feel like Mai wouldn’t think complaining about people is worth her time, you know? And I can’t imagine Ajisai-san doing that at all.”

“If Aa-chan was like, ‘Hey, don’t you think so-and-so is getting a little full of themselves? I just wonder if maybe it’s time to teach them a lesson they’ll never forget,’ I’d, like, completely flip out.”

My eyes lit up, Pocky stick forgotten in my mouth. “Y-yeah, me too! Do you also look at her sometimes and think she’s secretly like that?”

“Totally. There’s no way someone that good can be real. I wouldn’t be surprised if she actually had, like, ninety-nine boyfriends or something.”

“Yeah! You get me!”

I was over the moon, delighted to find for the first time ever someone who shared my impression of Ajisai-san. I wasn’t the only one completely delusional about her!

“But, like, I say that stuff too,” Kaho-chan said. “That stuff” being mean gossip. She stuck her tongue out cheekily. “That’s why I said you’re pretty unusual.”

I mean… I didn’t speak ill of anyone else because I didn’t want it to come back around to bite me like a boomerang. Plus, whenever people didn’t act their best toward me, I rationalized that I was even more self-centered in junior high than they were right now, so I probably annoyed a lot more people. Even when people did things to me that were borderline bullying, I always figured it was fine—I was Amaori Renako, after all. I deserved it.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of me being nice,” I said, “so much as me having so many hang-ups that I don’t want to start throwing stones from this glass house.”

“Huh? You have hang-ups?”

“Huh?”

I was bewildered by her “You do?” expression. “You mean, I come across as a person without hang-ups?” I asked.

“Uh…it’s kinda fifty-fifty whether you have any or not,” Kaho-

chan said.

"I'm bursting at the seams with hang-ups!" I accidentally blurted this out, perhaps because of the sheer surreal nature of being in a love hotel. "I wish I was as upright and honest as Ajisai-san, as strong as Satsuki-san, as bright and energetic as you, and…and… Okay, I'm going to skip Mai for now. My point is, I'm hung up on this around the clock!"

"Wow." Kaho-chan took a sip of her soda. "Well, I mean, I get that."

"You do?!"

"It can't be that much of a shock, can it? Well, I dunno how you picture me, but I'd love to be more like other people. I get really jealous all the time."

Wanting to be like other people was one thing, but flat-out jealousy was something I didn't experience all that often. Whenever I got anywhere near that, junior high me appeared out of nowhere and stabbed me with the knife called, "Don't get ahead of yourself now."

Kaho-chan snickered and then looked down to the end of the table coolly. I felt like I could see her true self in those eyes. Still, the thought of Kaho-chan, a girl who normally played up the whole pampered child act, having mental hang-ups struck me as odd. I guess you could never really know who someone truly was.

Wait. Did that mean Kaho-chan wanted to be like *me*? Nah, no way. A super popular cosplayer like her could never be jealous of me.

In an attempt to dispel this lull in the conversation, Kaho-chan spoke up again. "Man, I wish I was taller so I could cosplay more characters. There's only so much heels can do, and I gotta get, like, 15cm on me in order to play dudes! I wish I was your height, at least."

"S-sorry," I said. "I wish I could share, but I can't."

"Hmmph!" Kaho-chan body slammed me. I screamed and toppled to the carpet. She giggled. "JK."

I chuckled back as she collapsed right down next to me. Her face was *very* close to mine. That bright grin was unlike what I'd ever seen on anyone else, and she was so pretty I couldn't begin to compare her to anyone either.

"U-uh, hey…?" I said.

“Hm?”

“You know…I really admire how you can immediately change topics whenever the conversation gets a little too heavy. I wish I could do that.”

Kaho-chan made a little noise of surprise.

I continued, hesitantly. “But it’s not, well. I’m not jealous of you or anything, I don’t think. After all, you’re who you are now because you actually went out and socialized with people, right? Like, you’ve gone out and held all these cosplay photoshoot events with adults and everything. And that’s amazing. I mean, I could never. That’s why, I just. Well.”

That’s why I thought Kaho-chan was brilliant. But just as I was about to say that, Kaho-chan slapped her palm over my mouth. I struggled.

“Ooh, what’s this? Rena-chin, are you trying to make a move ’cause we’re in a love hotel?”

I shook my head no, furiously. That was not it!

“I guess you kinda got me going for a moment there,” she said, “but for you, of all people? Hmph!”

“What do you mean, ‘of all people’?!”

Kaho-chan smirked. “Hey, I just came up with a super-duper good idea. Can I tease you for a sec?”

“You can’t seriously think I’ll say yes.”

As I sat back down on the sofa, Kaho-chan came up behind me and threw herself across my back like she was going in for a hug. She felt warm against me, probably because she was so petite. Even as I could feel her curves, I didn’t lose my head. I didn’t! I swear!

“I-is that it?” I said. “Th-this is nothing.”

She must have done it because she thought I had a thing for girls, the jerk. Kaho-chan nuzzled up to me.

“Nuh-uh,” I insisted. “You’re not affecting me one bit. I mean, outside of the fact that this sort of tickles.”

Kaho-chan couldn’t *always* lead me along by the nose. Sure, she was clinging to me from behind in a love hotel, but that didn’t mean nothin’!

“Bah,” Kaho-chan said. “I thought my charms would make your heart race, but they don’t. Hmmph! Fine, fine, let’s watch TV or something.”

I snickered, relishing in the taste of total victory, and then Kaho-chan pressed the button on the remote controller next to me. The TV came to life at once, and a sensual voice accosted my ears.

“[REDACTED],” moaned the lady on TV.

Uh, hello?! A beat too late, I turned my head to look at Kaho-chan. “Uh, excuse me, what the heck is this? Hello?!”

Kaho-chan burst into laughter. The TV was playing, well, a man and a woman getting it on like rabbits! What was all this about?

“K-Kaho-chan, what is this?” I demanded.

“Oh, wow!” she said. “Check out all the pixelation!”

“I’m not looking!”

I whipped my head away as fast as humanly possible. The whole room reverberated with the sound of a woman going, “Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh!” If this wasn’t horrifyingly awkward, then I don’t know what was!

“I mean, it’s a love hotel and all, so they show porn for free. Seems kind of a waste not to check it out,” Kaho-chan said.

“Is this your idea of teasing me?!”

“Oh hey, doesn’t that actress look like one of the girls in the quintet?”

“Huh?!”

Against my will, I stared at the screen. The actress’s beautiful face appeared up close and…wait, no, no, no.

“She doesn’t look remotely like anyone!” I snapped.

Kaho-chan burst into more laughter. “What, who were you thinking she’d look like?”

“Ugh, turn it off already!”

Snickering all the while, Kaho-chan changed the channel. “Oh, this one’s porn too! It’s pickup artist porn, Rena-chin!”

“I am *not* looking!”

Freaking Kaho-chan! She thought she could get the better of me

with this, huh?

And we'd been having such a pleasant, friendly time before all this! God, it pissed me off.

I wanted to take the upper hand, so I said, "So, how 'bout them final exam scores, huh?"

"Oh yeah," said Kaho-chan. "I heard from Saa-chan that you worked super hard this time around. Good for you! Oh, and I got the ninth top score in the whole grade."

She was by far superior to me.

"How?!" I cried. "You were only in the B class like me back in cram school!"

"I had to work really hard to get my grades up so my parents would approve of me cosplaying, y'get me?"

“No. I don’t get it. How come I’m the only one this stupid?”

I buried my face in my hands. Mai, Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan were all great students. Not like me. They were all wonderful, and I was the only bad one here. Yes, so bad I could feel the dark side calling my name.

Did Kaho really have zero flaws? Seriously, where were they? Come on, I’d take anything!

As I puzzled over this, Kaho-chan said, “I’m gonna go run a bath,” and went off to the bathroom. She poked her head out and smirked. “You wanna join me, Rena-chin?”

“I do not!”

“Aww, how come? There’s nothing wrong with two friends taking a bath together, y’know? Wait, are you feeling shy ’cause I’m so cute? Is that it?”

I gritted my teeth. *Yeah, yeah, good argument! Lucky you, having a way with words!*

“Fine!” I snapped. “I’ll take a bath with you, happy? But I’m just going to wash as fast as I can and then get out. Nothing to it!”

“And you can wash my back, Rena-chin!”

“Did I ask?!”

Thinking on it now, I realize that seeing naked, cute girls, regardless of whether they were my friends or not, got my heart racing (due to nerves, mind you!) so the battle was lost before it even began. Oh well. Sometimes in life, you have to rise to the challenge even if you know you’ll lose anyway. That didn’t necessarily mean that this was one of those times, though. But still.

At any rate, I stripped down to my underwear and bra in no time flat and, towel in hand, called to Kaho-chan, “The bath’s ready!” It was time for me to take the initiative.

“Okey-dokey!” she called back. “Coming!”

Kaho-chan pulled a glasses case out of her bag and put it next to the sink. Oh yeah, Minaguchi-san had worn glasses, but there wasn’t a trace of that same shy little girl in Kaho-chan anymore.

“Kaho-chan, when did you start wearing contacts?” I asked.

“About when I started junior high. Once I got used to ’em, they turned out to be waaaay easier.”

Kaho-chan took out her disposable contacts in order to get in the bath, and then stopped short.

“Hm?” I said. “Kaho-chan?”

I was about to ask if her stomach hurt or something, but then Kaho-chan turned as white as a sheet.

“Oh no…” she whimpered.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Kaho-chan solemnly muttered, “I just accidentally took my extrovert cosplay off.”

“Huh?!” Say what now? What was that supposed to mean?

Kaho-chan immediately forced herself to sound chipper. “O-okey-dokey, Amaori-san… No, that’s not right. Um. Let’s, uh, get in the bath, Rena-chin. Yay, baths! Yay… Oh god, baths?! Okay, no, it’s fine. It’s totally chill! I’m so chill about this!”

“Uh, okay…?”

I stared at her, wondering what on earth had just happened. She looked as scared stiff as yours truly whenever I got in front of a camera.

“Um, I’m just. Uh. I’m g-gonna take my clothes off, so don’t…d-don’t peek, okay…? ’Cause I’m scared.”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

I had kind of figured Kaho-chan would immediately throw her clothes off with zero shame about it whatsoever, so this behavior of hers was beyond strange. Wait a minute. Was this her latest attempt at teasing me?

“I’m going to get in first,” I said.

“O-okey-dokey…” she said back, in a voice that sounded like she was on the verge of fainting.

I stole a quiet glance at Kaho-chan. She looked nervous, without any of her usual self-assurance. What the heck was going on?

After rinsing off in the shower, I climbed into the tub. The bathtub in this love hotel was circular and wide enough that I could stretch my

legs out as long as I liked.

"This is great," I sighed. I could feel the hot water soaking into me, relaxing my fried nerves.

But Kaho-chan took her sweet time in joining me. Just as I was beginning to wonder what was wrong, she finally stepped in entirely covered by a bath towel. The bare skin I could see was flushed red, as if her embarrassment had spread out over her whole body.

"U-uh, hey, Rena-chin," she said. "I'm kinda not very sweaty, so I think I may only need a quick rinse off."

"Oh. Okay."

"Y-yup, that's the plan. 'Kay, so I'm gonna go hop in the shower now."

Kaho-chan was being awfully meek right now. I was about to nod my head and let her do her thing, but then I stopped short. Renako Holmes (who?) started whispering to me with something that was half a joke and half a logical deduction.

"Say, Kaho-chan, did I hear you just mention something about an extrovert cosplay?" I asked. "Is that, by any chance, something you do when we're together?"

Kaho-chan twitched and folded in on herself further. "Y-yeah, I guess."

"Ah, then it's elementary, my dear Watson. You must use your contacts as a psychological suggestion to become more social, no?"

The frightened look in Kaho-chan's eyes was a match to that of Minaguchi-san's in my memory. "Y-yeah, I guess, but…who's Watson?"

"Oh wait, for real? So the Kaho-chan I've been talking to all this time is, like, 24/7 Super Kaho-chan, and this is the real Kaho-chan?"

"I-I mean, yeah… You could say that. B-but I'm not really trying to hide it. It's just. Um. Well. I never thought I had to bring it up. And like. You know," Kaho-chan stammered.

That explained why she'd been so quick to try and hypnotize me. I mean, it'd done wonders for her, hadn't it? Her personality was completely different.

Anyway, that meant that Kaho-chan really was the shy, timid Minaguchi-san I remembered. Yeah, that made sense. Well, it was nice

to be reunited once more with my sweet, quiet friend. This was more or less a golden opportunity, right? My eyes glittered. It was only right for me to use this as payback for all the endless, merciless teasing she'd subjected me to, wasn't it? Was this not my sole chance to claim victory?

All right then. I put my hand to my mouth and giggled, à la Kaho-chan. "Ooh, let me guess. Kaho-chan, are you *embarrassed* about getting in the bath with me?"

Kaho-chan noticeably freaked out, à la me. She turned to me with her face bright red. "Huh?! N-no, I'm not!"

"Then c'mon, hurry up and get in, Kaho-chan. Come join me."

"R-Rena-chin? W-well, I guess if you really want my company that badly, I guess I could try… Oh, but I need to rinse off first."

Before Kaho-chan could sneak her way into the shower, I said, "Kaho-chan."

She jumped again and spun around. "Y-yeah?!"

Her grandiose reactions were awfully amusing, I had to admit. Now I kind of got how Kaho-chan felt about teasing me.

"You've still got your towel on. If it gets wet, you can't use it to dry off, you know?"

"Th-that's certainly true. I guess I, um, had better take it off."

She timidly unwound the towel like a bride on her wedding night. Oddly, it was kind of sexy.

Just as Kaho-chan soaped up her hand towel, I sat up. "Oh yeah, that reminds me. Kaho-chan, you asked me to wash your back, didn't you?"

"I-I did?!"

The moment my nakedness entered her field of vision, Kaho-chan squeaked and looked away. Even though she could see me naked, I actually didn't feel that embarrassed. So this is how it felt to be the aggressor!

Kaho-chan whimpered. "Oh god, why'd I get so carried away? I should have known I'd have to take my contacts off to bathe and all too."

I snickered. "Come on. Park your butt!"

I plonked Kaho-chan into a chair and went to sit behind her. Once I accepted the hand towel from her, I made grabby motions with my hands. It was payback time, baby!

“You seem awfully shy, young miss,” I said.

“I mean, that’s ’cause I don’t have a good figure like you do,” she said. “Of course I’m gonna be self-conscious.”

“I mean, outside of my boobs, I don’t have all that great of a figure either.”

There was a full-length mirror in front of us, so I had a crystal-clear view of Kaho-chan’s bright red face. With her hair untied and her head hung low, she looked so pretty that my heart unintentionally skipped a beat.

“Besides, I think you’re plenty cute as you are,” I told her.

Kaho-chan whimpered again. “Th-thanks. But, uh, could you cool it with the compliments a little?”

She folded in on herself even further. The difference between this behavior and that of the normal Kaho-chan was astronomical, and it made her look all that much cuter. It also made me feel weird. I almost wanted to keep messing with her to evoke even cuter, more embarrassed expressions. I think it was like wanting to pet a cat that doesn’t want to be petted.

“I really wish I wasn’t cute,” Kaho-chan said. “I wanna be pretty instead.”

“Yeah?”

The moment I gently touched Kaho-chan’s smooth back with the towel, she jerked and shrieked. I flushed involuntarily.

“Kaho-chan, that was a bit much,” I said.

“S-sorry! It just tickled.”

She hadn’t done anything wrong, but here she was apologizing anyway. I was starting to feel like I was doing something awfully naughty. I chuckled to myself. Now it was time to show her that I was a force to be reckoned with too.

So, from her back to her butt, her shoulders to her biceps, I washed her oh so carefully and tenderly so as not to damage this charming young girl’s soft skin. Kaho-chan kept making little sighs and

mewling noises which, after hearing the voice of the actress on TV earlier, only served to fan the flames of my naughty feelings.

"Rena-chin," she sighed. "No. Don't… Ah…"

Oh god, her cute voice was doing things to my ears. Wait. If this went on for much longer, I was going to go loopy. Sure, it was fun to wash a cute girl's back properly, but I think any further attacks were beyond me. Time to call it a day here. Yeah, I decided to retreat before I ended up displaying my own lack of competence. Besides, this was enough for payback. Phew. My heart had really been going nuts for a minute there.

"Okay, your back's all done," I said.

Now that I'd had my fun, I thought she'd go rinse off, but instead she went, "Ooh…okay…" and quietly turned around like it was the only natural response. What the heck?

I froze for a moment. Kaho-chan's eyes were squeezed shut as she trembled on the spot, clearly undergoing horrible humiliation. She balled her tiny hands into fists. Wait, what? Was she asking me to wash her front side too? Kaho-chan was entirely open to me right now, from her small breasts to her slender waist, her soft thighs, her curled-in toes —all laid out as if on a platter for me to dive in on and enjoy. No one had asked her to be this vulnerable. This was absolutely going too far, right? I mean, come on! And yes, I knew I'd never have another opportunity like this again, but still! If I beat Kaho-chan here, then I could have had a chance to rise above her in the pecking order. That meant I'd be above her!

Oh, I was going to regret this. Gingerly, I reached out and barely grazed her white, tightly closed thighs with the towel. Kaho-chan gulped and squeaked, lighting my head on fire with a whoomph. One of the most popular girls in school, the cosplayer Nagipo-chan, was now in a position that no one had ever seen her in.

Kaho-chan twitched every time I moved, flushed with shame as her eyebrows knitted together. This was, dare I say…risky business. I couldn't handle it. This was where my courage ran out. If I went any further, I figured that Kaho-chan would start showing up in risqué dreams, and this was risqué enough already. My body was producing too much dopamine as it was.

I put the towel in Kaho-chan's hand and closed her fingers around

it. “There, I’m done!” I said.

Kaho-chan tentatively cracked her eyes open. She looked up at me almost feverishly and whispered, “Um, uh…are you sure?”

Excuse me? What did she *mean* was I sure? Did she want me to keep going? *Now you’re just teasing me, you minx!* I was supposed to be the one on the warpath here, so when had she turned the tide? *Dammit, Amaori Renako, don’t lose your mind like you’re some kind of scrub!* I chastised myself. I was the victor here, not her! It was time for me to be confident and go, “Well, just this once, okay?”

“Y-yeah,” I said instead, adding an unpracticed wink. “That was fun. Your skin was really nice and soft.”

Kaho-chan whimpered. Then, as if she had suddenly come to her senses, she yanked the towel away and said, “Rena-chin, just you wait. I’m gonna get you for this someday, I swear…”

As she sounded so weak, I boldly declared my victory and chuckled. “Any time! But you’ll never beat me, no matter how much you try. Right, itty-bitty cutesy-wutesy Kaho-chan?”

“Frick you, Rena-chin!”

It looked like her core personality was the same as ever, at least.

Phew, that was a close one. I had no idea the teaser could have such a difficult time of it too. I wondered if, perhaps, I could give Mai, Satsuki-san, or Ajisai-san the same treatment. Okay, no way. I wasn’t up for that!

Later on, Kaho-chan and I soaked in the tub side by side. I had to admit, love hotel bathtubs were pretty nice in the sense that two people could both stretch out comfortably. I flipped a switch to turn on the jacuzzi and felt all the better for it.

Kaho-chan seemed a little calmer than she had been earlier too. Still in her shy mode, she sunk into the bath water up to her mouth and mumbled in a reproachful tone, “Rena-chin, you seem *awfully* comfortable with this set-up.”

“Oh, ho, you think? That’s good.” I mean, bathing with pretty girls was second nature to me at this point, you know? I was a veteran when it came to this. Okay, no, sorry for lying. It wasn’t remotely second nature, and every time felt like a life-threatening experience.

“You extroverts are freaky,” Kaho-chan muttered.

Yeah, her eyesight really must have sucked. That, or because Kaho-chan was so very much not an extrovert herself, my meager amounts of extroversion were enough to fool her.

She splashed her face with the hot water. “I really suck,” she said. “I totally forget how to talk to people when I take out my contacts. It’s like, there’s stuff I wanna say, but the words don’t come out anymore.”

“Huh, okay.” (Felt that.)

“Like I go to a convenience store and buy a bento, a thing of ice cream, a bag of chips, and a bottle of something, but then I can’t find the right moment to ask for a bag, so I end up having to juggle them all the way home as best I can.”

“Interesting.” (Felt that one too.)

The inner junior high me nodded and went, “Ah, so it’s that sort of social anxiety, I see.” There are two types of people out there with social anxiety. One of them’s the kind who can’t talk in general, and the other’s the kind who can’t shut up. Kaho-chan was the former whereas I had been the latter—emphasis on the pluperfect, thank you very much!

“At any rate,” I said, “the idea of cosplaying as an extrovert is really interesting.”

“Mm,” she said. “I just started doing it, and somewhere along the way I ended up pulling it off. I’ve always had fun acting as characters, that’s all. And when I think about it as a cosplay, I can be more outgoing than I would be otherwise.”

“That makes sense. I think I get how you feel.”

In a sense, my turning over a new leaf for high school was cosplaying as my ideal human being too. If I hadn’t told myself to be different than I normally was, then I wouldn’t have been able to talk to Mai on the first day of school or any number of those things that followed.

“You sure do like cosplay, Kaho-chan,” I said.

“…Yeah, I do.” She said it so simply that it seemed heartfelt. “I guess it’s the one thing I can proudly say I like more than anyone else does. That’s why I had so much fun when we got to do this together. I had a really good time, you know.”

“Oh. Okay.” Being told straight-up how much she liked it made me look down on reflex. Then I asked, “Hey, Kaho-chan…when you say you like it, what does that mean to you?”

“Good question. Hmm… I guess it’s like, you get this big ‘aaah!’ feeling in your body that kinda involuntarily makes you wanna start running, you know?”

“…Yeah, I do.”

Kaho-chan was incredible. I wondered if I could ever find something I liked as much as she did. Mai and Ajisai-san almost certainly felt that same level of passion for me, which made me happy…but at the same time, kind of freaked me out. Was I able to feel the same way in turn? To tell you the truth, I didn’t know. I might not have been able to, but…I really wanted to. I wanted to say with confidence the answer which, deep down, I knew was the truth.

“Kaho-chan—” I began. But just as I was about to raise the question, I cut myself off.

“Yeah?”

I was about to ask her what she thought I should do, but then I changed my mind about requesting such a favor from her. This was a problem that I needed to solve on my own.

“Um…” I said. But of course, I lacked the skill to break off partway through and come up with something clever to say instead, so my body and brain decided to go in two different directions altogether. That is, I looked at Kaho-chan sitting next to me and ended up saying to her, “I really like the shape of your boobs.”

Kaho-chan went silent for a moment. Then she whipped around and wailed, “Rena-chin, you frickin’ perv!”

***

Kaho-chan wasted no time in leaving the bathroom, so I had a chance to loaf around in the big tub to my heart’s content. Sure, it felt bad having her scream of “You frickin’ perv!” ringing in my ears, but still. I wasn’t *that* perverted. If I was, then wouldn’t I have leapt at the chance to fondle her tits when I was washing her? Yeah, so that meant I was clearly no pervert, right? Flawless reasoning. Yup, I was off the

hook for the perv accusation!

Just then, I heard Kaho-chan scream bloody murder. Were we being invaded?!

I leapt out of the bath with a splash, dried off on a towel as fast as I could, and sprinted to Kaho-chan. She had her glasses on and was staring at her phone, wide-eyed.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” I gasped.

“Oh, Rena-chin! Wait, Rena-chin, why are you naked? Are you trying to show off your boobies?”

“No, for crying out loud! But you screamed like nobody’s business!”

Kaho-chan covered her face with her hand but still peeked at me through the cracks between her fingers.

Mortified (as one ought to be), I stormed back into the bathroom and only came back out after I had a bathrobe on. Then I looked at Kaho-chan sitting in her chair. At any rate, she didn’t appear to have suddenly been attacked, so there was some relief. But her pupils were still wide open, so I guessed she wasn’t out of the danger zone yet.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Listen, listen, listen. Oh my god, it’s crazy. It’s too crazy. Listen.” She made zero sense, so she thrust her phone at me so I could just go and look for myself already.

“I got an invitation,” she said. “I’ve been invited to the Makuhari Cosplay Summit.”

“Whoa, what?!”

I stampeded over and looked at the phone screen. Sure enough, she had a DM from some admin-looking person.

“They’re holding a show and invited eight of the currently trending cosplayer groups,” Kaho-chan explained. “It’s an annual event with only the most incredible and famous cosplayers, and they invited *me*. Is this for real?”

“Whoa! That’s great news, Kaho-chan! Like, crazy great news! Wait, so what does this mean exactly?”

“So let’s say my cosplayer combat score is at 12,000 play.”

“Huh? Uh, okay.” That was certainly an interesting unit for it. I wondered if she meant her follower count.

“That puts me in the top five hundred or so,” she went on.

“Oh, okay. Wait, what? You’re in the top five hundred of all cosplayers in Japan? That’s beyond cool!”

But Kaho-chan frantically shook her head and raised her voice. She could only get so loud because she was protesting, which was too real. (Felt that one as well.) “No, no! The godly cosplayers are all in the top three hundred, and everyone below that is basically lumped up together. I’m really not that good, I swear! And the Makuhari Cosplay Summit is a super distinguished event that only invites the top hundred or so people in Japan.”

Kaho-chan stopped short, like she’d broken down. It made me worried. “But I guess someone on the organizer side is looking to discover new talent, and I must have fit the bill.”

Even after hearing this last bit, I still felt the same as ever: Kaho-chan was incredible! I mean, she got invited to a whole freaking event like those pro FPS players in the videos I’d watch from time to time. Now she was a hundred percent on the media side of the equation.

“See? You’re awesome!” I said. “Only you could have gotten this!”

Yet even while I was a ball of excitement, Kaho-chan looked away.

“I’m gonna tell them no,” she mumbled.

“Wait, why?” I caught Kaho-chan’s hand before she could type back at lightning speed, *Sorry, I can’t.*

“If someone like me participated, I’d feel horrible for everyone else who didn’t get in, y’know?” she said.

“But they choose you, not those other people! You should be proud of yourself.”

“Some people are more serious about cosplay than I am. If I’m the one who gets featured, I’ll just make them all upset.”

God, that was too real. Anyway!

“No!” I screamed, making a heartfelt plea. “Kaho-chan, this is them acknowledging how far you’ve come!” Kaho-chan slowly looked up with anxious eyes as I berated her. “You’ve loved cosplaying for

years and given so much joy to tons of people, you know? That's why they offered this, Kaho-chan. Because you've worked so hard!"

And it even said so in the DM and everything. They were inviting Nagipo-san because the demographics were expanding to include tons of young cosplayers. Even that lady who came to our first photoshoot had talked about how she'd been a big fan of Kaho-chan for ages. The sole reason that so many people fell in love with her like that was because of her single-minded devotion to this thing she loved.

"I mean, well, it might be hard to make a decision right off the bat…" I continued. I realized that it was pretty rich of me to tell Kaho-chan to be brave when I still hadn't worked up my own courage. But come on. I *did* want to be brave too, you know? And I was sure that Kaho-chan must have been in the same boat.

That's why I grabbed Kaho-chan's hand and looked into her eyes. "Let's give it a shot, Kaho-chan. I'll be here to help you in any way possible."

"Oh, Rena-chin…"

Kaho-chan still looked unsettled, but she squeezed her phone and nodded slightly. "Thanks for saying that. It really hasn't been all fun and games, and I've had a lot of moments where I almost quit. But you're right. I really should give this some more thought."

"Yeah, you should!"

There was still a week before she had to tell the organizers yes or no. I'm sure she still had a lot to think about, but hey. I believed in her. Because the light that I could glimpse in her smile was proof, to my mind, of all the hard work Kaho-chan had put in to come this far.

Once I was done drying my hair, I went out and found Kaho-chan in bed. "Are you asleep already?" I asked her.

"Sorta," she said. "I'm just dozing off a li'l." She got up, rubbing her eyes.

We both brushed our teeth next to one another with the toothbrushes included in the hotel's amenities (do love hotels even have amenities?). Kaho-chan was zoning out, which, compared to her normal perky self, was ridiculously cute. I figured working hard all day and then getting that DM must have exhausted her both mentally and

physically. Plus, the photography session had basically been a one-woman show for her.

"We should go to bed soon," I said.

Kaho-chan made a sleepy noise of agreement.

I took her by the hand and led her to the bedroom, whereupon Kaho-chan threw herself into the bed with a WHUMP. As I tucked her in, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was now her older sister or something. I guess she was like the little sister to everyone in Ashigaya, not so much because of her extrovert cosplay, but because she exuded such an inherent level of charm that inspired everyone to want to protect and take care of her. I mean, duh. Changing your outfit doesn't make you a whole different person or anything. Believe me, I wish it could, but that's not how the world works. That's why even Kaho-chan dreamed of being pretty.

"C'mon, Rena-chin," Kaho-chan called.

"Coming."

I got into bed too. This love hotel bed was so huge it could sleep—heck, forget one or two, maybe four people comfortably.

Wait, but then how was I supposed to get the lights? I felt around for buttons on the bed and tried them one by one. One turned on music, another turned on or off weird mood lighting. I finally managed to kill the lights and lay down too. Then, just as I did, Kaho-chan flopped on top of me. Whoa!

She lay her head on top of my stomach and made a little purring noise in her throat. With how light she felt, she really was like a cat.

"K-Kaho-chan?" I said. Since she was so warm from the bath, I couldn't help but think how nice it would feel for me to hold her in my arms. "Wh-what's all this about?"

At this point, it didn't matter if she was introverted or extroverted or what. The fact of the matter is that I had a cute girl right before my eyes! What was I supposed to do if she said something like, "I can't fall asleep without a pillow to hug"? Would I just have to spend a sleepless night with her squeezing me?

Just then, Kaho-chan mumbled in a voice like she was already dreaming, "Your tummy's nice and soft, Rena-chin… You'd make a good pillow to sleep on."

“Uh, really? Well, thanks for the compliment…?” Was this a stealthy way of calling me fat?

Kaho-chan giggled. “I think it’s better to be a li’l soft, y’know?”

But everyone who was clearly skinnier than me was more popular. I wanted to scream that in her ear, but common sense held me back. After all, considering the person Kaho-chan was crushing on, well—let’s just say I was popular in my own way.

Still dreamily, Kaho-chan asked, “Hey, Rena-chin, do you still like Mai-Mai?”

“Um.” God, that felt like ages ago, that time in the hotel in Akasaka when she said to me, “Rena-chin, you like Mai too, don’tcha?” She’d been completely off the mark, naturally, but so much had gone down since then. And as a result of all that, well…

I pictured Mai’s gentle smile, the touch of her fingers, the scent of her perfume, the taste of her kisses. If you were to ask me if I liked her, I guess there was only one answer. I’d been pretending not to notice this the whole time, stubbornly sticking to my guns and doing my best to hide it away. But, like Kaho-chan, I wanted to be open about my feelings of what I liked.

I was silent for several moments and then said:

“Yeah. I think I do.”

Those words weren’t meant for anyone but her. I mean, I don’t think that I could have told that to anyone but Kaho-chan.

I could feel her grinning. “Gotcha,” she said. As she was using my stomach for a pillow, I worried that she could hear my heartbeat.

Now that we were on the subject of my feelings for Mai, I think I was into her from the beginning, and my insistence on being best friends stemmed from a lack of self-confidence. It was just, well, I didn’t want her to hate me. So how could I go further and be her girlfriend?

“Me too,” Kaho-chan said. “I’m not gonna give in.”

My heart ached. When I chose someone, was Kaho-chan going to hate me? That was the last thing I wanted, which meant I’d be better off choosing neither. But no. I took all my constant desires to run away and

shoved them into a box. Sure, sometimes retreat's an option, but the reason I kept running away from things was an attempt to protect myself. Yet what was the whole point of reinventing myself for high school? What did I really want? Friends who'd never betray me, no matter what? Having the attention of the whole class? A brilliant high school experience?

But if it wasn't any of those things, I had no choice but to say, "Okay, Kaho-chan." I ruffled her hair. "I'm going to give it my best shot too."

"Sounds like a plan!" Kaho-chan thrust an energetic fist in the air, narrowly missing punching me in the nose. Yikes.

"I think we'd better get you some rest," I said.

She didn't respond. *Kaho-chan?* I wondered. I tilted my head in confusion, only to realize that she had fallen asleep on my stomach. *Hey, wait, Kaho-chan! Hold the phone!* Now I couldn't move. *You mean I have to go to sleep like this? Hey, Kaho-chan! Kaho-chan!*

Kaho-chan eventually got up to go to the bathroom, mumbling incoherently all the while, and I used that opportunity to go to bed for real. That was a close shave. I mean, things were still pretty hairy, what with having a cute, defenseless girl sleeping next to me so close our shoulders knocked together.

But you know what? I think my MP, drained ever since the end of summer vacation, was coming back for real. As odd as it was, that day I'd skipped school and slept a bunch had been relaxing for my body but had done nothing for my mind. Working toward a goal and trying to reach said goal felt a lot better. And it was way better for my mood to have a wrap party with a pal afterward, giggling and talking about stupid stuff. I wondered why that was.

You know, I finally felt calm now. *Thanks, Kaho-chan,* I thought, *for getting me to the point where I refuse to run away any longer. Now it's my turn to step up to the plate.*

Chapter 3:
There's No Freaking Way I Can Do This Performance! Unless...

BACK IN JUNIOR HIGH, at least before I stopped going to school, I remember hearing the girls in my class squealing about getting boyfriends. My reaction was more or less, "Eh, whatever." It felt like something happening in a whole other world. That, I think, is why when Mai asked me out, my instinctual reaction was to go for the "nope, I don't date" route and then try to come up with a reason to justify it. To me, the action of dating was synonymous with taking responsibility for someone else's life, and that felt too serious for me. You know, in shonen manga, the protagonist only tells his feelings to his love interest once ever, and when she starts liking him back, that's basically the climax of the series. I guess in real life there must be stuff after that, but I didn't know what that stuff was. I didn't have a clue that most people's first love doesn't result in marriage and that you grew up dating and breaking up with all sorts of folks before finding a person you truly loved and settling down with them. I never thought of dating someone casually. Believe me, if I could change my thinking that easily, life would have gone a whole lot smoother for me.

On top of all that, the first person to ever ask me out was the most popular girl in school, someone as freaking radiant as the sun. I knew for a fact that if I dated her, I'd be overwhelmed by an inferiority complex 24/7 so bad it'd burn my retinas. I didn't want to be a shojo manga love interest who the supadari would fall in love with at first sight. All I wanted was to spend my days goofing off and having fun like in a slice-of-life. Yet I really enjoyed being with Mai, and my heart skipped a beat every time we held hands. That's not even going into our kisses, and we got dangerously close to doing the hanky-panky—yet, in spite of all that, I insisted we were just friends.

People were made up of more than just themselves. Things rubbed off on them—manga, video games, TV shows, family, friends, the news—and worked together to make the person. So, at one point, I realized that some percentage of my makeup came from Oduka Mai: the messages she sent me at night when I was gaming, the selfies of her

taken against beautiful backgrounds, the phone calls where we talked about things of little consequence, the smiles as bright as the sun. From the start, Mai had laid out all these conditions for me and taught me the correct answers. You'd never make a little kid race an Olympic runner in a sprint, but since the ability to communicate isn't something that can be seen with the naked eye, we had no way of knowing about this large gap in our abilities. And I think that was kinda the process by which Mai and I got closer together. Since I was all about style over substance, I was like a toddler who'd barely just learned to stand on my own, and Mai was like my mother kindly leading me by the hand. She'd been patiently waiting all this time for me to grow emotionally, eternally lighting the way forward on this journey of mine.

Even at this moment, I wasn't sure if what I felt for her was romantic love, but that didn't change things. When Mai had done so much for me, how on earth could I ever return the favor?

***

"Oduka-san?" Michiru-sensei asked as I bumped into her in the hallway at lunch. "You're looking for her?"

"Y-yeah," I said.

"Hmm. Sorry, haven't seen her."

"Oh, okay," I said. "I'll go look for her. Thanks for telling me."

And then, just as I began to go, Michiru-sensei called, "Oh, that reminds me. Don't go to the roof so much, okay? It's off-limits because that low fence is a hazard. Make sense?"

Michiru-sensei's casual way of talking meant that no matter what she was telling me off for, I always took it to heart and never felt the urge to go, "Oh, shaddup!" I think she might have been born to be a teacher.

"Oh, right," I said with a bow. "Sorry." I'm pretty sure if I told her I'd fallen off once already, she'd put a strict ban on the place altogether. With that, I dashed away.

It was the Monday after Kaho-chan and I went to a love hotel together, and as I'd made up my mind to sit down and talk with her, I was on the hunt for Mai. She was in such high demand that she rarely

stayed anywhere for long, leaving only rumors of sightings in her wake, like some kind of elusive cryptid.

But when I came upon Michiru-sensei, my trail ran cold. That meant… Well, I had one last place in mind she could have gone. I took to the stairs.

I turned the knob without bothering with the key and slowly pushed the metal door open. Light beamed down on me from the muggy, overcast sky as the view opened up before me. And there she was. I'd found her, but my bewilderment at the sight eclipsed the joy in spotting her.

"Mai?" I asked.

She turned around. "Oh, is that you?"

"What're you…?" I began to say, but then I stopped short. Mai was always the lone sun in the sky, so what I was seeing couldn't be possible. Surely she couldn't look so uncertain that she'd be ready to jump off the roof at any second.

"Oh, never mind," I said. "Um, Mai, I was hoping to talk with you for a moment." I smiled and walked up to her to kick things off. This was the first time in ages that we were alone, and I worried that I wasn't making the right sort of expression.

Mai's face lit up in a very typical Mai manner. "Oh?" she said. "My, what a lucky coincidence. I was thinking the same thing."

"You were?"

"I was."

I stood opposite her. Unlike with Kaho-chan, I had to look up to see her face. Tilting my head back at this familiar angle brought with it a slight pang of nostalgia.

"Um, well. You first," I said.

"Ah, very well."

I could never figure out when it was appropriate to talk, and now I couldn't recall how my conversations with Mai had gone before. How did I used to approach her?

"Let me preface this with the disclaimer that this is rather presumptuous of me." Mai smiled her usual benevolent Oduka Mai grin as her hair swayed in the wind. "But it appears that I will be earning a

day off this Sunday for the first time in quite a while, so I was hoping to spend the time with you. Let's go on a date."

"Wh-whoa, a date!" I hadn't had such a straightforward invitation in ages, and it struck a chord with me that reverberated with a boom. This, too, was another effect of having my MP replenished. My reaction to all external stimuli had gone up to the proper levels; it was basically as if I'd had a factory reset.

Mai giggled at my overreaction. "I'm glad I worked up the courage to ask if this surprised you so much."

"Y-you just happened to land a critical hit, that's all." That explanation didn't make much sense to me either, but Mai just shrugged.

"At any rate, I wasn't thinking we could go alone," she said. "What say you to a double date with Ajisai?"

I blinked a couple of times. "Wait. You mean, all three of us?"

"Of course, we don't have to if you don't want to."

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait," I said. I put my hands up to interrupt Mai. It was fair to say that I'd made a ton of growth since first meeting her, in terms of following along with the speed of the conversation and learning how to take time-outs to give myself room to think…or I thought it was fair to say, at any rate. But she said all three of us. And that meant…she wanted my response about the whole summer vacation thing, right?

Mai glanced up at the sky. "Please, you needn't be so cautious. I'm not trying to push you into making a decision any sooner. I merely thought that all this waiting must be hard on everyone. So, what do you say? If this is too much trouble, then I'm always happy to wait for another opening in my schedule."

I nodded. "…Yeah, sure."

There was still some time before the deadline… While I procrastinated, Mai and Ajisai-san were probably emotional wrecks. Well, I don't know if Mai could actually be an emotional wreck, but you know what I mean.

I balled my hands into fists and nodded once again, more firmly this time. "Yeah, sure! Sounds fun."

"Oh. Does it? Well, then we have a plan. Why not go to an

amusement park, since we have the chance?"

"Whoa, an amusement park!" I repeated. That was about as date-y as it got. Three friends going to an amusement park was certainly an exciting idea, but that wasn't all. We weren't just going to have fun; someone was going to go home heartbroken. However, I refused to back out, because I wanted to face the two of them head-on as I should.

"Oh, but you'd better not rent out the whole park just for us," I warned her. "I'd feel so embarrassed I'd rupture my stomach!"

"Very well. I'll ask Ajisai what she thinks. If she disagrees, then majority rules, no?"

"I think we should be unanimous on this!"

Mai laughed as I got a bit too worked up. "By the way," she said, "what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Oh. That. Um." My cheeks reddened, and I looked away with a vague grin. "Y'know, in honor of the date and all, I'll, uh. Talk to you then. Yeah."

"Oh? Very well. I shall look forward to it."

I'd come up here with the aim of actually talking things out with her, but I didn't have a concrete plan for how to go about it, much to my embarrassment. Do you think maybe I'd just wanted to hear Mai's voice or something? Oh great, now my cheeks were on fire.

Mai tilted her head in confusion, and I looked away. Oh hell, it was no use. The thing I'd said to Kaho-chan was stuck in my heart and refused to come out, playing over and over like a music box.

"Never mind!" I said.

I should have known perfectly well how pretty Mai was, and yet I couldn't help but wonder: had she always been this gorgeous?

Ugh, now that I'd admitted my feelings to myself, there was no freaking way things would stay as normal. But I guess that's just how it works. Everything changes—people, relationships, feelings. First Mai and then Ajisai-san had worked up their courage with the desire to change our relationship statuses. Now, at last, it was my turn to do the same.

***

Once we got Ajisai-san's agreement, our three-way date was locked in stone. Oddly, I felt calm about it in the days leading up to Sunday. I guess maybe it was because I'd already decided to go through with it, or maybe because I was being more open with myself. But as I bided my time, like a person waiting silently for the judge to hand down the verdict, my thoughts were on Mai and Ajisai-san. Still… Even in admitting my feelings to myself, I was being rather, shall we say, pessimistic. In the constant whirlwind following my turning over a new leaf for high school, almost nothing had gone smoothly, but such was my life. I knew this date wouldn't end with me going, "Wow, that went *so* well! Everything was perfect! Huzzah!"

Also, I found it unbelievable that Mai was going down this route. At the time, I was doing my very best just to get through the day, so I was completely oblivious to everyone else's feelings. I must have been disregarding them left and right. I wish, if I had been up for the task, that I could have talked with Mai a bit more up there on the roof. But Mai was a lot more stubborn than me, and so I knew she wouldn't be open with me even if we had talked it out.

Hey, Mai, I thought, *what's been going on inside your head this whole time?*

***

When Sunday rolled around, I steeled my courage and got on the train. I'd been so nervous this morning that I got up at 5 a.m. and showered twice. I wore my best outfit and made both my hair and makeup immaculate, feeling less like I was heading off to a fun hang-out and more to a battlefield. Maybe I should have borrowed one of Kaho-chan's fake cosplay swords.

I got off at a stop in a tourist area. As I walked along with a clear blue sky overhead, I thought back to when Mai had told me she could make the weather nice whenever she wanted it to be. I guess maybe it was thanks to her that it was sunny today.

I got to the place where we were supposed to meet a little before

the others did. Mai and crowds didn't mix well, and I didn't want her to get mobbed by people while waiting for me. So I waited near the gate, but since Mai and Ajisai-san were still nowhere in sight, I zoned out and watched the families and couples pass by.

"Me, Mai, and Ajisai-san going to an amusement park, huh?" I whispered to myself. Even when saying it out loud, it still felt surreal as heck. Now that I thought about it, I'd really come a long way from the day that I decided to reinvent my image for high school.

As I was lost in thought, arms folded across my chest, I noticed someone in the distance. I guess Ajisai-san was the first to arrive. She noticed me and dashed over.

"Hi, Rena-chan!" she called.

"Oh, hey!"

God, she was so cute! Oh darn it, I was flipping out over her. I bet there were hearts in my eyes already. Meanwhile, the heart in my chest went beyond skipping a beat and straight to skipping out on me altogether. It was being very assertive today. *Listen, you can cool it. I'm plenty grateful to have a heart, you know. So calm down, Heart-kun.*

But, when Ajisai-san stared at me intently, Heart-kun did no such thing. "Wh-what's the matter?" I asked her.

"Hmm," she said. "You look like you've got something you want to tell me."

"Huh? U-uh, I guess, nice weather we're having, right…?"

"Yeah, it is nice." She tilted her head, smiled, and made an x in front of her chest. Wrong answer, apparently.

Frantic, I scrambled to redeem myself and yelled, "Th-thanks for coming to see me on the weekend too!"

"Ooh. You're welcome." Ajisai-san gripped her skirt slightly and bobbed her head. I guess that was what she was looking for? Maybe. I couldn't exactly tell.

Ever since her confession, Ajisai-san had gotten more aggressive in showing her affection for me, and it really freaked me out. My extrovert mask was about as thick as the shell of a cream puff, with the filling ready to leak out at any moment. I really didn't want to show her what a creep I was, so I swore to myself to *not* blurt out, "Oh my god, you're so cute!" upon seeing her just like I did that time over summer vacation.

“Anyway, is Mai-chan not here yet?” she asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe they’re still parking the limo.”

“Oh, right, she takes a limo. I’ve seen her come to school in that on some rainy days. It must be amazing to be that rich, you know?”

Then she went “Oh!” and dug her phone out of her bag. “It’s Mai,” she told me. “Hello?”

I guess maybe Mai was calling her to tell us she’d be a little late. But after a short conversation, Ajisai-san lifted the phone away from her ear with a troubled frown. Then she hit me out of left field with a real shocker: “Mai-chan said she has a sudden work assignment and can’t come.”

“Huh?” I said. Wait, so did that mean what I think it meant?

Ajisai-san put a hand to her mouth and looked away shyly. “She said the two of us should go have fun without her…”

“Wait, what?” Hold the phone, Mai. How could she spring this on us like that? And leave me and Ajisai-san alone to boot? Yeah, no two ways about it, I was not prepared for this. I lost my mind in a big way.

“Well, it’s not like we can argue. Work’s work,” I said. “But I mean…”

“Right,” Ajisai-san said. “What do you want to do?”

Her eyes were inquisitive and worried. She could ask me until she was blue in the face, but I mean…I couldn’t just be like, “Well, if Mai’s not coming, I guess we’d better go home. See you tomorrow at school!”

“W-wanna go have fun ourselves…?” I suggested nervously.

“Oh, I don’t want to force you…”

Oh, shoot. My timid whisper had made Ajisai-san even more upset! But I didn’t mean it the way she was thinking, I swear.

“Let’s go and have a rip-roaring good time,” I said. “Let’s pick those feet up, we’re burning daylight! I was hyped to go to the amusement park, and to be alone with you to sweeten the deal? Woo-hoo!”

Ajisai-san squeaked as I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to the gates. I only realized too late that I was holding her hand. This was *her hand* in mine! And it was so soft!

“Oh, um. Uh. That’s not what I meant to do!” I said.

But before I could let go, Ajisai-san, looking like she had a case of her own nerves, grabbed me back. “R-right,” she said. “I know. But thanks for having me today.”

Oh god. She was holding onto me. Me! Being close enough to hold hands put us at a distance of two meters apart, tops. But walking that far apart would have been obnoxious to everyone around us, so we practically stuck together and ended up maybe thirty centimeters apart. My point is, Ajisai-san was right next to me. I didn’t know what kind of perfume she was wearing, but she smelled really good. *Huh,* I thought to myself. *It’s making my heart skip a beat.*

“Chances like this don’t come along every day,” Ajisai-san told me. “So let’s enjoy ourselves, okay?”

She grinned, like she was inviting me to cut class and come to the beach with her. Well, we’d see if my heart managed to make it through today in one piece! Freaking Mai.

First off, we stopped and opened up the pamphlet they gave us at the entrance so we could figure out where to go. Naturally, that meant Ajisai-san’s face was right next to mine, which, also naturally, took my breath away. It turns out that people don’t need to breathe for up to about a minute on average. But after that, things start getting dicey.

“Rena-chan, do you handle roller coasters okay? …Rena-chan?” Ajisai-san asked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine with them.”

I drew back and took a big gulp of oxygen. That was necessary for talking, as I couldn’t carry on a conversation while not breathing. Look at me, learning a thing or two.

At any rate, I didn’t have the faintest idea how well I’d handle roller coasters, considering I’d barely been to theme parks in the first place. Still, my gut feeling was that all thrill rides would be kind of freaky. Even the name sounded bad enough. If I’d been here alone or with my family, I probably would have been like, “Nope, I’m good sitting this one out.”

“Uh, and how about you?” I asked.

“I think I’d like to give them a shot.” Ajisai-san giggled, hiding her

mouth behind the pamphlet. “Whenever I come with my family, we always have to do the kiddy rides—the merry-go-round, the tea cups, you know. But come on, we’re in high school already. Don’t you think that’s kind of embarrassing?”

I mean, I was pretty sure the sight of Ajisai-san in a kiddy ride would be adorable, but I nodded right off the bat. “Yeah, that makes sense. Well, then I guess we have to give the thrill rides a try!”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, of course. I hardly get motion sick or anything.”

I wasn’t sure exactly how relevant that was, but I was pretty sure my inner ears weren’t weak enough to do me in. My only problem was that thrill rides gave me a case of the jitters, but it wasn’t anything worse than that.

“Okay,” Ajisai-san said. “Well then, hmm. They have a lot of roller coasters.”

She pointed to the pamphlet happily. I accidentally found myself staring at her face as opposed to the paper. At school, Ajisai-san belonged to everyone, but here on a weekend, I guess she was mine alone. Did a girl who was pretty enough to be Miss Japan really ask me out? Like, had that legit happened? Even without the use of hypnosis, my brain felt on the verge of breaking.

Noticing my eyes on her, Ajisai-san tilted her head. “What’s up?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing.” I put my hands up like a mental barrier and, embarrassed, muttered, “I was just thinking about how cute you look today.”

“Oh. Um.” Ajisai-san immediately turned red. She drew in her chin and looked up at me. “Wow. You finally called me cute.”

Her reaction was so ridiculously adorable that I squeaked. “Huh?! No, get real. For every time I say it out loud, I must repeat it a hundred times to myself.”

“So you think about me hundreds of times more than you say out loud?”

Ajisai-san was going too far into uncharted territory here. “Y-yeah, maybe…” I said.

“Oh?” Ajisai-san pursed her mouth into a displeased frown. What was that for?

“I mean, hundreds of times is still too little!” I clarified. “After all, you’re cute every second—every instant, even! Even right now, you’re super cute. You’re freaking adorable!”

“W-well, in that case…” Ajisai-san mumbled like the next bit was hard to say. Now that we were alone, she was in a bit of a teasing mode. And if even *she* had qualms about saying it, well—I knew whatever it was would be absolutely fatal.

“I wish you’d tell me whenever those thoughts cross your mind, you know?” she said.

Oh god, here it was: a super, ultra, insane difficulty quest.

Okay, but actually, saying it was pretty easy. It was like saying “sugar is sweet” or “water is wet.” I felt like it’d be pretty gross if I kept repeating it like a broken record, though. But hey, if that’s what she wanted… And considering what an injustice I’d been doing her, I couldn’t exactly refuse.

So I put a hand to my heart, took a deep breath, and said, “Okay. Ajisai-san, you’re cute.”

“Wait, you’re starting already?!”

“You’re so cute. Your reactions are cute too. So’s your voice, for that matter.”

“Th-that’s enough, Rena-chan. Let’s get going!”

“Oh, and the way you walk is cute too. I love the cute little trip-trap of your footsteps. Cute outfit, cute walk, cute all around—oh, and it sure is cute to watch you go, if you catch my drift.”

“Okay, okay, I get it! I’m *sorry*!”

Even after she told me off, I still went on singing her praises for a while longer until she finally hit me with a strong “Enough!” (Seeing Ajisai-san angry was cute too.)

***

Now I was about to face my first-ever roller coaster. We decided

to start off with a not-very-hardcore one, the most beginner-friendly of the bunch. It was one of those guys that brought you up to a particular height and then dropped you back down again, so I guess it wasn't a roller coaster so much as a free fall.

We stood in line for a while, and then it was finally our turn. We sat down, and some cushioning thing came down from overhead with a clank to fasten us in our seats. Now I couldn't move a bit.

"I-I'm starting to get a little fidgety," I told her.

"Me too," Ajisai-san said. "I can barely sit still I'm so excited. I can't wait for it to start."

Ajisai-san's eyes glittered like she was one of her little brothers.

Then the machine gradually started up while everyone around us squealed and screamed. My feet dangled helplessly as we slowly rose into the air. An inner voice questioned whether I should have sat this one out. But I could see so much more now, because we were already as high up as an apartment building. I would have been a goner if I'd been afraid of heights, but I was still managing to just barely keep it together. It came from being the oldest sibling; I'd have never made it through if I was born later.

Then the machine reached its zenith and, in one fell swoop, gravity yanked us down. For a moment, I felt like we were floating. Then I screamed and clung onto the safety bar for dear life. Ajisai-san screamed too, sounding like she was having the time of her life. My organs were pushed up; my eyes spun. We swung up and down as if a giant was shaking us. Finally, the freight elevator with its cargo of screams descended to the very bottom…and stopped. The safety bar went up, and I tottered on shaky legs onto firm ground.

After we grabbed our bags, Ajisai-san and I went out into the walkway. She fixed her ruffled hair and grinned at me in delight. "That was incredible! Wasn't that so much fun, Rena-chan?"

"That was h-hell-hell…"

"R-Rena-chan? Oh no, did that actually scare you? Do you need a minute to take a rest?"

I grabbed her hand. "That," I said, "was *hella* fun!"

"Rena-chan, your eyes are sparkling!"

"Yeah! Because that rocked! That felt amazing!"

It was my first time ever experiencing such a thrill. I'd just tried something incredible! I couldn't believe everyone had kept me in the dark about this all this time. How could they? Now I was obsessed!

Just then, I had a sense of déjà vu and recalled my first hang-out with Mai, when I took her to a VR place. Mai had smiled in such delight, and the thought of it made my heart twinge.

"Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

I came back to myself with a gasp and looked around. Right. This was the amusement park, and I was here with Ajisai-san. What was I doing, thinking about someone else?

"Sorry," I said. "Were you saying something?"

"Not really. I was just asking where we should go next."

"Oh, right. Well, I guess we could try all the thrill rides and master them all!"

"You're really into this, huh? Oh, wait." Ajisai-san pondered for a moment and then relaxed with a grin. "Let's save one of them for later. That way, we can try it next time when we come back with Mai."

"Oh, okay." So I wasn't the only one; Ajisai-san had Mai on the mind too.

When I looked at her grin, my guilty conscience vanished in a puff. Yeah, you know what? I should have just said it. Man, Ajisai-san really was so nice.

"Sure," I said. I grinned and nodded. "But what if she's scared of thrill rides?"

Ajisai-san laughed. "That'd be surprising, but it could happen. If she is, then I guess we can all ride the merry-go-round together."

"Oh my god, that'd be so cute. I'd need to get a video on my phone."

Ajisai-san and I set off for the next ride, sharing a grin all the way there.

After standing in line and going on the ride, we stopped in at a café for a quick tea break before setting off for another ride. We followed this same pattern over and over until late afternoon. By then, we'd pretty much memorized the whole map, and we took a little break

to just chill on a bench.

"That was so fun," I said.

"For sure."

We grinned, both enjoying the same pleasant sense of fatigue. I'd had some trepidation at first over how this weekend hangout would go, but it'd turned out to be really nice. Of course, I had Ajisai-san's fantastic people skills to thank for that, but the amusement park itself had been just as good. There was plenty for us to talk about as we walked around, and time flew by as we stood in line for each attraction, chatting about our experiences on the last one. Now I finally understood why amusement parks were such staples in the world of dating. It was, like, crazy fun in a really normal way.

"I think we still have time for about one more," I said. "Is there anything else you'd like to take a stab at?"

"Oh, um. Maybe." Ajisai-san was about to raise her hand, but she tucked it back in and looked away.

"Oooh, what? Tell me. I've been calling all the shots today, so you can pick our last guy for a change."

"No, we're equal. I wanted to try all the thrill rides too. But thanks, Rena-chan."

"Don't mention it."

"To be perfectly honest," she admitted, "I think we might not be ready for this… But it's not like I'll get the chance again, so I want to give it a shot."

There was something enchanting in her voice. She pointed, but it wasn't down at the pamphlet. I followed her finger to the towering object in the distance, with its gondolas even now slowly turning like the second hand on a clock. The Ferris wheel.

Ajisai-san's blush deepened. "You know, I've…always wanted to take a ride on a Ferris wheel with a crush."

The intensity of that desire blasted me in the face like a gale pushing my hair back. I found it hard to breathe in that sudden headwind.

"Oh. Uh," I said. Prior to this point, I would have simply agreed and let her push me along. Believe me, I still didn't like myself…but

Ajisai-san liked me, and I wanted to acknowledge that. After all, that was the one feeling I'd always have. So I made up my mind to accept Ajisai-san first.

"…Okay," I said. I put my hand out for her. "Let's do it."

The look on her face wasn't quite a smile. "Okay, Rena-chan," she said. She looked almost like a little girl, flummoxed and troubled by the weight of her own burdens.

The gondola slowly began to rise into the air, taking the two of us with it. Ajisai-san sat next to me, not across. Alone in this little box, we were cut off from the rest of the world, not at all like the freefall. Even if I, hypothetically speaking, wanted to book it out of there at some point in the ten-minute ride, I couldn't exactly leave unless I wanted to leap out of the gondola. The whole experience was vastly different from riding a Ferris wheel with my family. This, I'm telling you, was a *date* Ferris wheel ride.

"…Hey, Rena-chan?" Ajisai-san said. She sounded bashful.

"Y-yeah?"

"I'm kind of…nervous right now."

"R-really…? I am too." To be fair, I was always nervous around Ajisai-san, so that didn't necessarily mean anything.

Falteringly, she muttered, "So, um… This was probably an odd request, so I might have startled you. I'm sorry if I took you off guard."

"Oh, uh, you did…but it's okay. I'm totally used to getting caught off guard!"

If I was to grade that response, I'd give it about two out of a hundred.

Ajisai-san didn't say anything back, so I guess she must really have been as nervous as she'd said. What was I supposed to do? I had next to no experience with this kind of thing, so my repertoire of options was limited.

"A-are you okay?" I asked. "Do you want me to be Renako-oneesan? I can do the whole 'there, there' thing if you want."

Ajisai-san pulled a face. *Eeep!*

"Jeez… That's not what I meant."

“Sorry!” Maybe she thought I was making fun of her. But god, sulking Ajisai-san was so cute too! I had a pretty bad feeling saying that would only be fanning the flames, though, so I refrained from commenting.

Then Ajisai-san carefully laid her hand on top of mine. *Oh my god.* The soft sensation tickled, and every nerve on my body focused on the spot where she touched me.

“R-Rena-chan…” she said.

“Yeah? Uh.”

“I like you.”

The sheer destructive force of those words about knocked me out. “Y-yeah, so I’ve heard…”

“I do, Renako. I really like you… Thanks for hanging out with me today.”

“Yeah, sure thing… Thanks to you too.”

“I had a good time.”

“Uh-huh, me too.”

And then Ajisai-san finally smiled. The awkward tension dissolved in a flash, and she let out a huge sigh. “Whew,” she said. “It sure takes a lot of courage to say you like someone, you know? I don’t know how you do it.”

“H-huh, me?”

“Well, you’re always going on about how much you like me, aren’t you?”

“I mean, yeah,” I said. “But those are just my honest feelings. Same with the cute thing.”

And also…I used to think that my “I like you”—an aggressive, one-sided present that never took the other person’s reaction into consideration—was different than Ajisai-san’s. But now, I wasn’t so sure.

I felt like I was on fire. Oh god, I hated getting all gross and sweaty next to Ajisai-san, but unfortunately, I had no ability to control this particular physiological phenomenon.

Ajisai-san giggled. “By the way, we need to keep quiet about the

fact that we went on a date and took this Ferris wheel ride together."

"Oh yeah, fair point."

Ajisai-san tapped a finger to her lips. "It'll be our little secret. Promise?"

"Yup." I copied her and grinned. "Promise."

And just as I touched my mouth, Ajisai-san closed her eyes and leaned in.

"Huh?" I said.

Ajisai-san's face filled my vision, and then she planted a kiss—not on my lips but on the finger between our mouths.

She giggled a little and drew back, her hair swaying. A smile bloomed on her face like a flower, and she put her hands to her cheeks to hide her blush. "Ooh gosh, that was nerve-racking."

Yeah, we'd passed the point of skipped beats and skipping-out hearts a while ago. At this stage, I could hear nothing but my heart pounding in my ears.

"A-Ajisai-san…" I said. My finger was still glued to my mouth.

"Mm-hmm. Um, hey." She looked bashful. "I know we shouldn't kiss because we're not dating. But I just…I really wanted to. So I couldn't help myself and kissed you over your finger, you know?"

Do you remember that one time she blew me a kiss? It had been so cute.

It'd never crossed my mind to think about who one day might kiss Ajisai-san, as the concept was not even remotely on my radar. The sensation of her lips on my index finger came as such a shock that it erased itself from my memory. However, I knew that I'd never forget the shy, blushing face she made in that moment.

And then our gondola reached the ground, telling us that our time for little secrets was at an end.

Ajisai-san got off the swaying evening train before I did and called, “Bye-bye, Rena-chan!”

“See you later,” I said. “Take care getting home, okay?”

“You too.” Ajisai-san pointed at me with a theatrical gesture. “You have to be careful, being such a cute girl and all.”

I grinned like a fool in response. “Y-you think? I guess, maybe. Anyway, uh…good night.”

“Nighty-night!” The door started to close, and for an instant, Ajisai-san’s smile looked kind of sad. “I guess next time we’ll have Mai with us, huh?” she said.

I didn’t know what she meant by that, so there was nothing I could do but parrot back to her, “Yeah, uh. I guess so.” But, to make up for it, I waved hard.

Ajisai-san stood on the platform watching me go as the train sped further and further away, leaving each of us alone. A sigh crept out of me unconsciously. After spending the whole day luxuriating in Ajisai-san’s cuteness, I didn’t feel ready to come back to reality. Man. That’d really been so fun. Well, the kiss over my finger at the end had made my heart feel like it was about to explode, but still.

I sighed again. Okay. I’d made up my mind about two things: how I wanted things to work out with Mai and how I wanted things to work out with Ajisai-san. Now all that I needed was courage. All I had to do was have faith in this conclusion I’d come to and then talk to both of them. My stomach hurt so bad I felt like I’d swallowed a burning stone. Before me, I could see the light of Mai and Ajisai-san, but if I turned my head to look back, the gloominess I carried within me stretched out like an unbroken wall. And this darkness, this inner shyness and shame, made an eloquent argument to do nothing. I didn’t want to choose anyone. I wanted to ignore the situation forever. I wanted to sit in this lukewarm bath, plug my ears and procrastinate, and run away from the situation. I wanted to act like nothing ever happened. Shut myself in my room. Forgo all responsibility. Choose to experience only the fun bits.

But I suppressed all these selfish arguments within me and looked

out the train window. The moon was beautiful tonight, glowing in the sky above.

Do you think I was any closer now to the girl I'd longed to be all those days ago? I wasn't sure. To begin with, what did this ideal me look like? I could see her outline bathed in light, but apart from the silhouette, I knew nothing else about her.

But time waited for no girl, and just like the turning cars of the Ferris wheel, the second hand always ticked onward.

"Next time I see Mai and Ajisai-san, I swear I'll… I'll…" But could I really, being who I was right now? This was bad. I could feel the darkness ready to engulf my heart once again.

Just then, my phone gave me a notif that someone had sent me a message. It was from Kaho-chan, and it read, *im gonna go to the makuhari cosplay summit.*

I put my hand to my mouth. What on earth was going on? Why did I feel like I was about to cry? Kaho-chan was dealing with an entirely different situation, but all the same, my brain took it upon itself to put myself in her shoes and be overwhelmed with happiness for her.

like, i love cosplay yknow?? i just know id be hella pissed if someone else took my place, she wrote.

Yeah. I got how she felt.

so even if tons of peeps don't think im up for the task or whatever, i still wanna join. this is where ive always wanted to be

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Screw other people and what they thought. That's what liking something was all about—what *you* and you alone thought. Sure, an enormous performance was bound to be loads more nerve-racking than the usual shows; had I been in her shoes, I was pretty sure the rehearsal alone would have been enough to petrify me. But the thing was, Kaho-chan wasn't me. She had so much more experience than I did, and that was why I was ready to cheer her on. She was my dear friend, and that meant I was going to support her through thick and thin.

so you gotta help me out one last time, Kaho-chan wrote. *come join me at the makuhari cosplay summit!!!*

…Uh, what? I read this message multiple times, extremely

confused. What was this “join” supposed to mean?

***

“It means group cosplay,” she said.

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.” And then my vision went black.

“Rena-chin?!” Kaho-chan squeaked.

It’d escaped my attention before, but Kaho-chan had mentioned eight of the top cosplayer *groups*, and she wouldn’t have worded it like that if she meant eight *people*. In fact, it turned out to be eight pairs of people.

“Nope,” I said. “No freaking way.”

It was Monday morning, the day after my date, and I was collapsed in a heap at the back of the classroom with zero care about what I must have looked like to anyone watching. This was not something a popular girl should do, but it sure was a heck of a lot better than passing out.

Go and cosplay before a huge audience? Me? Heck, I’d been scared stiff just having three photographers crowding around me the other day. I considered asking Kaho-chan if she thought I was up to the task, but I changed my mind. She must have or else she wouldn’t have asked.

I staggered to my feet. “Why can’t you go ask Satsuki-san or something?”

“Nuh-uh. I want you!” She looked straight at me. “Rena-chin, I want to do this with *you*.”

Bluh. Well, to be fair, I had been the one to give her the nudge that led her to accept the invitation. Additionally, I had the sneaking suspicion I’d blurted out something like, “I’ll be here to help you in any way possible.” I don’t think I could straight-up take that back and go, “Oh, no. I was just saying that to get you amped up, but I didn’t actually mean it. You’re the one who has to do all the work, so don’t look at me LOL.” Yeah, if I said that, I’d have been better off alone for life.

“Okay, fine…” I said. Yeah, yeah, I know. I was the one who’d

volunteered. You can't take back what you've said any more than you can turn back the clock, I get it.

I put a hand to my chest and took a deep breath. Then, gingerly, I looked Kaho-chan in the eyes and said, "I might be more trouble than I'm worth, but…actually, scratch that. I'm one hundred percent sure that I'll be more trouble than I'm worth."

"How come that's literally the only thing you're confident about?"

"But hey, as long as you're cool with that…then please let me help." I bowed and held out my hand.

Kaho-chan grinned. "How come you're the one asking me for a favor? Shouldn't it be the other way 'round?"

"I-I mean, yeah… But we all know I'm just going to drag you down, so."

I wanted to help her, I wanted to be there for her, and yet I didn't want to be an obnoxious pain in the butt.

As if accepting all those complex emotions, Kaho-chan grabbed my hand. "That's okay. I like doing You-Know-What with you, silly."

We were in class, hence why she didn't actually say the word "cosplay" out loud. But she gave me a big nod, and I said, "Okay!" back.

Then Kaho-chan looked away and muttered, "'Sides, Saa-chan told me she was busy that day."

Hello? Kaho-chan? How come she'd asked Satsuki-san before me? Wasn't I her favorite partner? Hey, Kaho-chan! Kaho-chan!

I went back to my seat and flopped over the desk. God, I'd just agreed to do something ridiculous. I bet I wasn't going to sleep a wink from now until the day of the event.

Ajisai-san turned around and, in a quiet, concerned voice, asked, "Rena-chan, what's the matter? You've looked dazed and upset for ages now."

I waved her away, my expression still dead tired. "I'm fiiine, I'm fiiiiiiine," I said. "That's sweet of you to check in on me, Ajisai-san."

"Y-you sound like you're shriveling up into a husk."

"Actually, can I be real with you for a sec?"

She cocked her head to one side. “What’s going on?” I glanced at Mai in her seat farther away. She’d stopped by my desk earlier to bow and apologize for no-showing yesterday. Ajisai-san and I both told her not to worry—work’s work, right?—and she smiled at us in a somewhat worried, forlorn way. However, I had my hands so full with the Kaho-chan issue that I didn’t really have it in me to pull off a thoughtful attempt at cheering her up. I mean, well, that and I felt guilty for procrastinating on the whole Mai thing again. But you get my point.

Anyway, I bobbed my head to Ajisai-san in gratitude and said, “So I’ve kind of gotten roped up into something wild. It’s like, a huge magical spell, and I don’t know if I can pull it off even if I use all my MP.”

“S-sure, okay.” She nodded earnestly, her face telling me she didn’t have a clue what I was talking about but was gamely trying to keep up anyway.

“The thing is, if not for that, I was planning on giving both you and Mai my answer today. Sorry about that…”

“N-no, that’s okay… Wait, what? What?!” Ajisai-san turned bright red, like her cheeks were smeared with blush. “Y-you were planning on responding today? Really? O-oh! That’s…shocking…”

“Huh? Uh, I mean, yeah… I was considering giving it a shot.” Emphasis on the “was.”

Ajisai-san clutched her chest for a few seconds and then whispered, “D-don’t you think it’s a little early for that? It hasn’t even been a full month yet.”

Wait, why was Ajisai-san the one saying that? “I mean, you guys have been waiting for ages. Isn’t it better to say it sooner rather than later?” I protested.

“W-well, that’s true, but… Jeez!” Ajisai-san puffed up her reddened cheeks in a pout and glared at me. Wait, why was she glaring at me? “I’m just happy you’re thinking about it. If you want me to wait, I’ll wait as long as you need. But come on, Rena-chan. You can’t spring this on me first thing in the morning at school, not with everyone around.”

“Oh, good point. I’m so sorry!”

Ajisai-san covered her face with her hands to hide her blush and

groaned, because I'd yelled so loud everyone in the classroom could hear me. Once again, all eyes turned to me. It was mortifying!

***

Our schedules leading up to the event were packed, and I went over to Kaho-chan's house day after day. Just like last time, we were going to dress up as the cat-eared maid and the bunny-eared maid from *Anima Meido*! But now Kaho-chan was adding on a few extra finishing touches to spiff them up a bit, which was whatever. Well, showing this much skin freaked me out, so *that* wasn't whatever, but you know what I mean. If we're going to be real, I would have preferred to show up in a full-body mascot suit, but we had a bigger issue on our hands, namely…

"We have to put on a performance?" I repeated.

"Mm-hmm," she said. "Each team's gotta do a three-minute performance onstage. That's how we're gonna get ranked! There's gonna be live audience and online judging."

I was aghast as Kaho-chan showed me videos on her phone. Here was a pair of cosplayers decked out in snappy costumes and putting on a sword fight. Here was a different pair acting out a scene from an anime. Here was a third pair doing some kind of awesome dance like they were idols at a concert. And I had to do something like *this* with Kaho-chan?

"It's only my first year of high school, I've just barely gotten my bearings in class, and you expect me to do *this*?!"

"Yup, and that's why we're having practice sessions every day from here to the event!" Kaho-chan cheerfully informed me.

"Why, what difference does it make? It's just going to take a scrub-level performance and make it, like, scrub-level performance 2.0."

"Yeah, so? If we can get to 2.0, we gotta do it, no matter what people think! We're not going to this show to embarrass ourselves, we're there to tell everyone how much we love cosplay!"

A lightning bolt struck inside my head. She was right. I might not have known my cos from my play, but I was fine being a cog in the machine necessary for Kaho-chan to share her feelings. If anything, I needed to up my cog game! Kaho-chan had cheered me on with all her

might, even though I lacked any confidence whatsoever. She must have been nervous herself, but she hadn't let that stop her from taking me by the hand and pulling me along.

As the summit drew closer and closer, my mental health went ass over teakettle in no time flat. With that and the upcoming deadline to respond to Ajisai-san, I started to feel uneasy, the same sort of sensation as when one sits down on Friday night and, without even doing anything, realizes it's already time for bed on Sunday.

One day, I tried asking Kaho-chan, "Hey, are you sure you're fine with me? I'm nowhere near as pretty as Satsuki-san, and I can't draw people in like Mai or Ajisai-san can either."

To be honest, the fact that I'd already made up my mind to do this but was *still* wringing my hands over it pissed me off. But Kaho-chan always responded to me earnestly, even though I was such a coward.

"Of course," she said. "Plus, I really, really wanted the chance to have fun and hang out like this with you again, you know."

"Oh, Kaho-chan…"

As she worked on the sewing machine in her room, fixing up a costume, Kaho-chan added, "But when I first saw you, I thought you'd ended up like in a whole other world. Then you went and forgot all about me to boot, so I thought I'd never get to do this again."

"Well." To be fair, I'd thought the same thing about her. Kaho-chan was so incredibly optimistic, powerful, and cute that she didn't resemble her old self at all. I thought I wasn't even on her radar anymore, and yet here she was, reaching out to me again. And it wasn't even just to talk about manga or anime like we used to—she was inviting me into the world of things she loved. It must have been how Kaho-chan felt when I pulled her into the world of the manga I enjoyed. We both did the same things for one another.

"I like being with you," she said. "I dunno if you'll get hooked on cosplay like me, but I'd like to hang out some more, Rena-chin. Let's go have fun on that big stage, just you and me, y'know?" She stopped sewing and looked up, a slight, embarrassed blush on her cheeks. "We'll have just as much fun as we used to. Nah, actually, it'll be loads more fun!"

“It’s hard to turn down such a passionate invitation,” I said. I sat down next to her and pulled her into a hug. “How could I say no to my best friend?”

Kaho-chan grinned and hugged me back. She felt warm against me. “Yay, Rena-chin!”

Now I finally felt the connection between the old and the new Kaho-chan. I really, really wanted to make this event a success, because I didn’t want the storm clouds to come back and cover Kaho-chan’s sunny smile again. I knew I tended to flake out whenever I got all rip-roaring to go on something, but I wanted to keep this feeling alive. Kaho-chan and I were once again spinning the stories of our lives together.

Kaho-chan came up with ideas for our performance. The two of us argued back and forth, going “no, not this” and “ooh, not that either,” and enjoyed making it better and better as time went on. I’m not sure if I wanted the clock to speed up or stop here forever, and I think Kaho-chan was in the same boat. The summit marked the end of this fun stretch of time, and that’s why I think she wanted to stay here like this with me for all eternity. Is that too presumptuous of me to say? It was like the time before class started in cram school, when we sat side by side, but stretching out long and unbroken.

But even this eventually came to an end.

The day my destiny would change forever was calling.

***

The Makuhari Cosplay Summit finally arrived in October. It’d now been half a year since I started high school, and I could barely believe I’d made it this far, as every day had passed by in a blur. I felt like I’d run from every low-level encounter and wound up in front of the final boss still at level 1. God, this all felt like way too much.

Kaho-chan and I met at the train station near the summit hall on

the day of. I guess there were some other anime events going on there too, because the station was packed. Kaho-chan was right. It really was a huge national event.

I loitered near the edge of the building playing with my phone until she finally rolled up a few minutes late, bags in tow.

"Hey, hey, hey, Rena-chin!" she called. "Today's a perfect day for cosplaying, don'tcha think?"

She had her contacts on today and was in full outgoing extrovert mode, with a cheerful, sunny grin and a dash of everyday cuteness.

"Hi, Kaho-chan. Thanks for having me today."

Kaho-chan laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. "C'mon, let's go rock this!"

There was something so trustworthy in that smile of hers. I could fall in love with her if I wasn't careful.

"Wow," I said. "You're not even nervous."

"Duh. That's 'cause popular girls don't feel nerves. They all think they're the center of the universe, y'know?"

"Really? I guess that's one way of looking at it."

"Well, I'd never survive this kinda thing as an asocial loser, y'know? So in order to get enough sleep last night, I toughed it out 'til the last minute and only took out my contacts moments before I nodded off."

This genius could use her own abilities perfectly.

"You're really something," I said. "I wish I had such convenient powers of autosuggestion too. Maybe I should morph into an extrovert whenever I clip my bangs back or something."

We each took a bag and set off for the exhibition hall.

"You have those hypnosis tracks I made for you, don'tcha?" she asked.

Ah, those. "Yeah, but they get me all worked up." Mind you, that hadn't stopped me from listening to them. Unfortunately, though, they were just drops in the bucket at this point.

Kaho-chan stopped in place. Hm? I turned to look back.

"They make you get…worked up?" she repeated.

"Huh?"

We looked at each other, and Kaho-chan started turning red.

I immediately broke out into a sweat. "Wait, what's the issue?" I said. "Kaho-chan, what're you picturing?"

"Oh, nothing," she singsonged. "Nothing, nothing at all. It's just a li'l, mm, embarrassing to hear that from a *friend*, y'know?"

I didn't one hundred percent get where she was taking this, but I could tell she was making a horrific misunderstanding. "No!" I snapped. "All I meant is that I start picturing your face, and then I remember what I did at the photoshoot and want to die of shame! Not whatever you're thinking of! I didn't mean they, like, turn me on or anything!"

As I struggled to explain myself, we arrived at the entrance hall. For a time, Kaho-chan refused to meet my eye. Oh god, don't tell me she thought I was a major perv again. For the last time, I was not!

As I was about to join the crowd funneling into the entrance, Kaho-chan beckoned me over and went off in a different direction altogether.

"Huh, why're you going that way, Kaho-chan?" I asked.

She chuckled. "'Cause we have contestant passes! This is the way for the participant entrance."

"Oh wow, we're contestants!"

We went over to some people with a folding table by the back door where Kaho-chan presented an invitation-looking thing. We then wrote our names on a roster, got two name badges, and were led inside. I felt nervous as I looked down at my badge marking me as a Cosplay Summit Contestant. This wasn't Wonderland, but I felt like I'd wandered into some other world anyway. Well, I mean, I *was* a rabbit. I guess that made Kaho-chan the Cheshire Cat.

They directed us down the hall into a locker room. It was pretty big, so I figured all of the contestants could change here. Kaho-chan and I went to our two designated adjacent lockers that, handily enough, came with mirrors. Before they left, the staff person asked us to be ready and assembled thirty minutes before the start of the show. That gave us quite a bit of time to kill. No one else was here yet. What were we supposed to do? It was better to change sooner rather than later,

right?

I looked to Kaho-chan to see if she had an idea, and I found her shoving her stuff into the locker before she whipped around.

"All right, Rena-chin!" she said. "Let's go check out the convention center!"

"Wait, can we? We don't have to wait here?"

"Nah, it's chill. C'mon, let's go have fun like a coupla extroverts. Pick those feet up, Rena-chin, let's go!"

I yelped in protest as she dragged me away down the back hallway and out into the convention hall. The moment she opened the door, I was bathed in the heat and glare of a spotlight like I'd walked into a planetarium. Some other shows had already begun, and the place was bustling with all different kinds of anime panels and whatnot.

"Wow," I said. "This is next level."

The lights winked one by one like stars, hence why it reminded me of a planetarium. It was like a whole galaxy created from people's passion and love, and it was so beautiful it took my breath away.

Kaho-chan laughed. "Pretty cool, right?"

Then, still laughing, she took me by the hand again and pulled me along like one of the stars making up this twinkling galaxy. She refused to be outdone by anyone here in this convention center. She shone brighter than all the rest.

"And we're gonna be a part of this awesomeness too!" she said.

Wow, I thought. *She's mind-blowing.* Kaho-chan was so straightforward about the things she cared for. I'd long since let go of the things that made my eyes light up like that, but Kaho-chan had held on to hers and treasured them this whole time. It was so admirable that I wished I was her. Maybe that's why I was spending time with her like this. Or maybe, from the start—even though I should have been focused on the Mai and Ajisai-san situation—I'd started talking to Kaho-chan with the hopes that she'd teach me what it meant to like something. Because that feeling of liking, I thought, was similar to the feeling of romantic love. It had to be.

"We sure are!" I said.

Kaho-chan and I traveled through that magical galaxy, watching

various impressive performances and feasting our eyes on the booth babes at the promo tables. As it was an anime convention, there were a bunch of cosplayers strolling around like it was nothing, and every time she saw one, Kaho-chan would lose her mind and yell, “Oh my gosh, *she’s* even here? She’s so famous!” Then she’d go on to tell me every single incredible thing about that person, fangirling away in a state of glee greater than I’d ever seen at school. I couldn’t help but grin at the incessant “Omg, omg, I just love her *so* much!”

Eventually, we returned to the locker room before the thirty-minute mark. Now it was our turn to become one of those stars.

“The stage is way smaller than it looks,” I said. “I’m surprised.”

“Right? It looks huge on stream. Maybe they’ve got some kinda trick to make it look bigger than it is,” Kaho-chan said. “Well, I dunno how it works, but it’s cool at any rate.”

By now, we were done changing and thus in the middle of carefully putting on our makeup. The locker room was pretty cramped, so we all made sure to keep to our own little bubbles so as to not get in anyone else’s way.

Just then, a mysterious figure appeared: another contestant. Oh snap. I realized at that moment that I had no idea what sort of etiquette cosplay culture demanded. You weren’t supposed to, like, hand out business cards to everyone before the event or something, right? Like, Kaho-chan had gone around to say hi to everyone beforehand and all, but you know.

I turned to look at Kaho-chan, afraid that I’d made another social faux pas, when I was assaulted by a screech of, “Ah ha! We meet again, Nagipo!”

My ears rang. Kaho-chan, opposite me, jerked upright. “Ah ha! I recognize that voice.”

Oh crap, was this a fight about to break out? *Stop it, guys, you’re scaring me.*

“Well, well, well current TweenCosplayer,” Kaho-chan said. “The one and only Serara Serarara!”

“Wait, she’s just a tween?” I exclaimed.

Others around me were just as surprised. “That girl’s in junior

high?" someone said.

"What're they thinking?" said another. "That's way too young."

"I bet she's using her daddy's money to cosplay!" added a third hostile voice.

The girl was already frowning, and the frown only deepened when she looked at Kaho. "They dare ask about me? Why, I am none other than Serara, your eternal rival!"

The young, pretty girl was dressed as a soldier carrying an assault rifle. Wait, I knew what game she was from! I played that FPS too! Wow, that costume looked just like the character, and she was super cute. Oh my god. Her makeup was so well done, and the slenderness of her young body made her seem all the more like a 2D character, perfect for this cosplay. Man, but here I thought junior high schoolers these days were more filled out. Maybe this girl was just an exception. Well, lacking any adoring kouhais, my reference material for junior high schoolers was limited to my sister… And speaking of my sister, I had the strangest feeling that I'd seen this girl somewhere in conjunction with her before.

But as I puzzled, the girl placed me before I did. "Oneesan-senpai?!" she yelped.

"Huh?"

I'd barely ever been called senpai, not once in elementary, junior high, or high school. And to top it off, this particular form of address meant—

"Wait a second…" I scrutinized her. Even with how much the cosplay makeup transformed her face, the girl was definitely one of my sister's friends who had come over to my house during summer vacation. The super pushy one!

"Wh-what're you doing here?" I sputtered.

"That's my line!" Seira-san—excuse me, Serara-chan—aimed her gun at Nagipo-chan. "You're no fair at all. Why'd you bring Oneesan-senpai along? You've gone and hired a powerful mercenary to join the fray!"

Ugh, my chest ached. Serara-chan recognized me as a powerful person, thanks to all the bragging I'd done in front of her about having Mai as a best friend and the fact that I'd gotten a business card from

Mai's mom. But that was fine. Kaho-chan thought I was a person with proper social skills and everything too, so I doubted she'd make any imprudent remarks.

Sure enough, Kaho-chan smirked and chuckled to herself. "See, this is what happens when I bust out the big guns. I'll do whatever it takes to win, don'tcha know." She rounded off this bizarre mix of tough talk and her usual cutesiness with a nihilistic grin.

"Curse you!" Serara-chan pulled the trigger with a frustrated clank. Naturally, no bullets came out, but, good sport that she was, Kaho-chan screamed and clutched her stomach anyway.

"Gloat while you can," Serara-chan continued. "Once you see my partner, I bet you'll start sobbing, tear off your wig, and throw yourself to the ground at my feet."

Kaho-chan popped up off the floor and asked, "So, where's this partner of yours at, huh?"

"She's coming later." Serara-chan looked away, bashfully.

"Ah ha," Kaho-chan said. "Lemme guess. She's not gonna show up in time, and you'll be disqualified. You'll let down all your supportive fans. Next thing you know, there'll be drama on social media, you'll get canceled, and they'll force you into retirement."

"I didn't ask for your input!" Serara fired off a round and riddled Kaho-chan with bullets, leaving me partnerless too. As I watched this go down, Serara-chan swung the gun to point at me. Wait, hello?

"How could you?" she said. "I thought you were so cool and pretty, y'know? But it turns out you're working for the enemy. You betrayed my trust, you know that?"

"Urk." Had she legit thought that much of me? I felt a bunch of apologies rising in my throat. I didn't want her to hate me!

But then Kaho-chan, who should have been shot dead, stood between me and the weapon.

"Leave her out of it, Serara Serarara. Rena-chin's only here because she wants to be. She's done nothing wrong."

"Quit treating me like I'm in *Bobobo-bo*!" Serara-chan stuck her tongue out and blew a big raspberry. "Fine, whatever! We'll settle this onstage. Who cares if she knows Oduka Mai? I'm waaaay cuter, anyway!"

She stomped off back to her own locker.

Jeez, that gave me a heart attack. What a coincidence to run into someone I knew.

Next to me, Kaho-chan grumbled, “What was that last bit about? What’s she trying to act tough for?”

“Yeah, I dunno,” I said with a quiet nod.

Also, I had to wonder: who in the world was Serara-chan’s partner? It couldn’t be… Not Haruna, right?! Please, anything but that!

Once we finished changing and getting ready, we left the locker room and went backstage. Along the way, I asked Kaho-chan what was up with Serara-chan. Turned out they’d been good cosplay collab buddies, but after a falling out, Serara-chan had treated Kaho-chan like an enemy ever since. It was so hard to get mad at Kaho-chan, let alone actually dislike her, that I was amazed. Her ability to get along with people rivaled Ajisai-san’s. I’d never expected to see anyone with a grudge against her unless Kaho-chan had actively tried to rile them up.

“Well, things get messy with cosplayers,” Kaho-chan said. “People get jealous or resentful, y’know?”

Ever since then, Kaho-chan had tried to get friends to cosplay with her whenever possible.

“This is even more brutal than high school,” I said. I would never have been cut out for it.

“Sure, but I love it, so I have no choice but to be prepared to pick fights and step out of my comfort zone. I just gotta wear extroversion like a suit of armor, y’know?”

“Don’t you get tired?”

“Yeah, sometimes. I’m not big on battling, deep down.”

Really? Then what was that whole bit about almost hitting me with a rock?

“But this is something I really wanna do,” she went on. “And if I can’t stand up for what I love, then I’d have nothing.” Kaho-chan fixed her gaze on the stage ahead of her. “That’s why I’m telling my inner coward to buck up and doing my best to get that fighting spirit going. Having a rival just makes me stand out more, y’know? And that means I

can do my best to win!"

She brandished her hand and stuck out her finger. I knew these were partially empty words, because I'd already heard how she really felt. Or, nah, it wasn't so much that either one was the full picture but that *both* sides were true. There was a Kaho-chan who thought she wasn't fit to stand onstage and a Kaho-chan who set her sights on defeating her rivals to claim victory. I guess it was just a question of which Kaho-chan she chose to show. At this point, the only thing I could do was try and not hold her back.

Now, as we waited in the dim light, the staff members explained more about the contest to us. Winners of the pair competition would receive a cash prize and other goodies, we were told.

"They're streaming this event up on a video website, of course," Kaho-chan whispered in my ear. "If I win some publicity, I can get a whole buncha new followers and then raise the participation fees for my own photoshoots. We could even get into industry events."

"I see," I said. I wasn't really sure how good that was, but I nodded anyway.

Incidentally, I wondered if Serara-chan's partner was here yet. I looked around, but I couldn't tell who she might be, and they finished talking while I was distracted.

"Wait, so," I said, "we line up to start, then we all leave and come back one by one to do our performances? Is that how this works?"

"Yeah, you got it!" she said. "Our turn's almost up. I can't stop trembling!"

This still didn't feel real to me. I mean, all the other cosplayers were magnificent, a feast for the eyes. It sounded like a joke that I was supposed to compete against them.

But there was no more time to dither over this, as we were marched out onto stage. All noise drained away, leaving a world of light.

***

"And without further ado," said the announcer, "let's bring in our

contestants. Go down the line and introduce yourselves. Tell us your name, your character, and anything else we should know about you."

I looked down from the stage and saw a sea of audience members, a huge mass of eyes. Oh, those eyes, those eyes, all those eyes! *And they were all trained on me!* What was going on? I felt dazzled, and the realization hit me instantly:

There was no freaking way I could pull this off.

One by one, the awesome contestants began to introduce themselves. My vision warped. This was a stage show for popular people only, those who had the proverbial "it." This wasn't a place for girls like me, who only ever went with the flow, to drop in casually. The only people worthy of being here were Mai, perhaps, or cosplayers like Kaho-chan who had put in tons of effort to make it this far. I wanted to run backstage, but even my legs refused to work.

Time relentlessly marched on, and I stood there stiff as a board until Kaho-chan passed me the mic.

"Call me Renakoala," I began, the words I'd practiced hundreds of times coming out like a robotic voice. I'm not sure what on earth I even said, but eventually my turn was up. I passed the mic to the person next to me, feeling like I'd just set an example of what *not* to do.

I looked down. What in the world had I been thinking, coming here? Did I really think I could help Kaho-chan by standing up onstage next to her? Did I think it'd somehow get me closer to Mai or Ajisai-san?

Did I, perhaps, think it'd make me start to actually like myself a little bit?

As I stood under the glare of that too-bright spotlight, all my resolve melted away. Right then and there, my will to keep going—easily, simply, all too quickly—vanished.

All right, I thought to myself. I surreptitiously made a fist and told

myself that once the show was over, I was going to apologize to everyone. It was time for me to say sorry for tricking them into thinking I was anything other than the horribly puny and spineless coward I was. And then I'd go back to Australia, cling to the limbs of one of my eucalyptus trees, and snooze away a good twenty hours of the day. Goodbye, human civilization…except for my phone, which would come with me.

Time went on even as I was broken inside, and Serara-chan in the last pair made her introductions. For someone only in junior high, she was definitely cute and knew how to work her charm. Out of all of the sixteen people on the stage, I was the only one who had nothing like that.

Oh yeah, and I guess Serara-chan's partner was finally here. Who was she? The audience burst into applause, so I figured she must have been popular, whoever she was. Well, while I was still human, I decided to gaze upon this eminence's marvelous countenance.

And the eminence turned out to be none other than—

"My name is Moon," she said, "and it is my pleasure to be Phantom from PEAK today."

She looked like a gorgeous soldier with her long black hair tied up and a gun in her hands.

I covered my mouth so I wouldn't shout, but believe me, I was screaming internally. Serara-chan's partner was freaking *Satsuki-san*!

Once we got backstage, Kaho-chan and I rounded on Serara-chan.

"How?!" Kaho-chan screamed.

Serara-chan laughed and slung her arm around Satsuki-san's waist as if to say that Satsuki-san now belonged to her. "Gotcha, Nagipo! When I saw her at your last shoot, I went up to her and poached her. Now we're even. Go on, rest on your partner's laurels all you want. I don't mind!"

"Grrr! How could you, Saa-chan?! I thought we had an understanding! How could you do this to me?" Kaho-chan yelled at the top of her lungs, never mind the fact that anyone hearing her would be bound to take this the wrong way.

Moon-san's face remained blank. "I'll do anything for money. She

just so happened to ask me first."

"Waaah! Frick you, Saa-chan!"

"Talk about a pro mercenary," I muttered.

Kaho-chan dashed away, and, much to my alarm, Moon-san didn't so much as quirk an eyebrow in response. I'd been completely depressed up until a few moments ago, but the sheer shock of seeing Satsuki-san here had made it vanish.

I mean, compared to the rest of the contestants, Moon-san's beauty was on a whole other level. I could feel the eyes on her, all making judgments. "Who's that?" "She must be a professional who belongs to an agency." "I can't believe they brought a legit model here." And it only made sense that they thought those things.

But Moon-san merely folded her arms across her chest and glared at me. Huh?! "I do believe," she said, "you've mistaken me for someone else. We've never met, *right*? I'm nothing but a random cosplayer, Moon-san, and I most certainly do not go by any other name."

The cat was already out of the bag, but she was acting like I didn't know. "What, does it say Moon on your birth certificate?" I asked.

"Yes. Same as on my ID card and library card."

"Ah," I said, making an "Ah" sort of expression. There really wasn't anything else I could say to that.

Serara-chan linked arms with Moon-san, squeezed her tight, and gushed in a sugary tone, "Our turn's coming up, so we're gonna head out." She giggled. "C'mon, Moon-oneesama! Wait, Moon-oneesama, slow down! Don't leave me behind!"

I watched in utter disbelief as the two hurried away. I mean… well, okay. Moon-san knew full well how pretty she was, so good for her to monetize it. I hoped she could keep using her good looks to bring herself even further happiness.

Then I heard a big cheer come from the stage and snapped out of my reverie. Once again, those feelings which had temporarily vacated came flooding back. Right. Being onstage had devastated me, freaked me out so much I'd gotten paralyzed, and made me determined to tell Kaho-chan I couldn't go on any further.

I looked all around for her in the dark backstage area. The negative, cowardly feelings continued to seep out of me like blood from

a torso wound. Once I found her, what was I going to do? I doubted she would let me off the hook if I simply apologized for letting her down. She'd dump me as a friend, of course. The sound of my own heartbeat pained me, but I had no other choice. People have limits, you know? I wasn't capable of flight, so this was my only option.

I found Kaho-chan on the ground in the corner with one of the staff members crouching down next to her. Huh? What was going on? I walked right up to them thoughtlessly.

The staff member bowed to Kaho-chan multiple times in a row. "I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't mean to bump into you."

"Are you okay, Kaho-chan?" I asked. *Oh shoot,* I realized. I'd accidentally said her real name. But Kaho-chan flashed me a feeble peace sign and dredged up a smile for me.

"I-I-I'm okay," she said. "I-I know I shouldn't have been standing around staring off into space in the middle of such a busy event."

The lady took a moment to look Kaho-chan over, checking her outfit for her. Nothing seemed to be messed up, much to my relief. So the lady bowed one more time and then hurried on back to her job. No harm, no foul, right? Okay, *I* wasn't exactly out of the woods yet, but I still couldn't help but be relieved that Kaho-chan wasn't hurt.

Now I needed to take responsibility for my own cowardice. "Um, hey, Nagipo-chan," I said. "I need to tell you…uh…"

A heavy pain settled in my stomach like I was turning down someone who'd just asked me out. I couldn't do this. Yeah, no freaking way. I never wanted to admit to it so long as I live, but there are some things in life you just can't do. I figured, at the very least, I could maybe go back and ask that staff member if Kaho-chan could go out to perform on her own.

But just as that thought crossed my mind, Kaho-chan put her arms around herself like she was freezing.

"Nagipo-chan?" I asked.

"Oh no," Kaho-chan mumbled, hanging her head.

"I was putting them back in, and she bumped into me… Now I've *lost my contacts*."

What? For a moment, I froze. Then, just as I turned to run away, Kaho-chan grabbed my hand.

"I can go back to the locker room and get your spares," I explained.

"No, there's not enough time. The place is packed, so we can't go back anymore."

Okay, then I could. Uh. Then I could…

"I'll find the ones you dropped!" I said.

"Okay. Wait, no, your costume'll get dirty." Kaho-chan stopped me before I could crawl around on the ground looking for them. I looked at her with the same sort of horror as when your stomach starts pitching a fit on the train. Kaho-chan couldn't go out onstage like this.

"Kaho-chan, this is brutal for you," I realized. Kaho-chan's extrovert cosplay was nothing more than autosuggestion, but to her, it was the trustiest good luck charm there was.

Her head still hanging low, she smiled in a rude joke at herself. "I'll be fine. I still have one, so I can see."

"Oh," I said. "You'll, uh, be okay so long as you have the one?"

"I mean, no, I'll still be a wreck, but it's whatever."

"You're not a wreck!" I found myself shouting.

Kaho-chan's head dropped. "No, I am. I'm a complete wreck, so it's all over."

"Kaho-chan? Hey, Kaho-chan, that's not true!"

"Why did I even come here? I'm a cosplayer who does the bare minimum, and I just let it get to my head way too much. Great, I know the stream's going to be filled with hate comments. Ugh, I can't do this. I want to cry."

"I know how you feel, but come on, Kaho-chan. You can't."

How had it all ended up like this? Our turn was creeping up on us any minute, and Kaho-chan was in her zero-confidence antisocial mode. With Moon-san and Serara-chan in the running, we stood no chance of winning. And to make matters worse, my confidence was busted too. This was about as bad as it could get, and now I felt terrible. I wanted

to go curl up in bed at this very minute. Now that it'd gotten this bad, why didn't we both forfeit and back out? I mean, even Kaho-chan was in rough shape. If we were going to run away, then fine. Let's. There was no need to force ourselves through an unpleasant experience.

And yet, even though I felt that with every fiber of my being, I said, "Kaho-chan, I know exactly how you feel, but you can't give up! I mean, you were the one who asked me here, and now this is what you're suggesting? Think what that does for me! I'm a complete nobody. I'd get so much hate that it'd do me in!"

It sounded like I hadn't given up at all, and I guess that was because, well—I knew exactly what kind of love Kaho-chan felt when she was talking about cosplay.

"The costumes I made suck," she said. "And even if I like dressing up, I'm no good at it. My cosplay isn't good enough to show other people yet. It's another story when you're wearing it, but when someone as ugly as me tries to go out and act cute? That's just gross."

"Are you being serious right now?!"

My hands moved on their own accord and clamped down on her shoulders.

"I mean, yeah," she mumbled, still looking down.

I know she felt she had no choice but to blame herself. But for Pete's sake! She shouldn't have looked down on herself, not after all the hard work she'd put in to make it this far! And how dare she say that in front of me? Me, who never felt like she made enough progress? Me, who continued to push myself out of my comfort zone anyway?

A deluge of whimpering gushed out of Kaho-chan's mouth like the flow of Niagara Falls.

"I'm a gloomy pessimist at heart. Heck, I couldn't even manage to invite people to a private photoshoot without you or Saa-chan to help out. But even with that, I was just fooling myself. Honestly, I really do know the extent of my capabilities. See, cosplayers have a whole caste system too. The people who get business deals or participate in major events are literal gods, but I could never be like one of them even in my wildest dreams. It's like I'm just one of the bottom-feeders hanging around the popular kids at school. I mean, the management people

basically committed a crime by inviting me. You know, because they got my hopes up, and I got too into it. I still hemmed and hawed for a whole week over whether I should join, but I should have kept my feet firmly planted in reality. See, you gotta know your own limits. Say you have someone who says they really love baseball. If they go to a super awesome school and spend the whole time getting treated like the ball boy, they're not gonna have any fun at all, you know? You have to know your place. Chasing your dreams when you don't have the talent, popularity, or recognition to pull it off is just a way to hurt yourself. Social outcasts like me have to live our whole lives on the fringes of society so we don't bother anyone. I can't get carried away or let it go to my head. I can't get cocky. I gotta give myself stern warnings. No matter how much my fans say they like me, I can't forget that I'm no better than a water flea. God, I wish I was a water flea. I'm so freaking ugly it makes me sick. I wish I was dead. I'm a frickin' short, tiny gremlin, and I'm dumb as bricks, and no one likes me. I don't have any dreams or any ambitions. I wish everyone would forget about me and I could go back and redo everything from elementary school on."

I put my hand on Kaho-chan's shoulder. "Kaho-chan…" I said, fixing her with a clear gaze.

She slowly looked up at me. "Rena-chin," she mumbled. There was a profound feeling of sadness in her eyes.

I yelled at her, "You're an asshole, you know that?!"

Kaho-chan squawked in surprise, and then I *headbutted* her with all of my might. Ow!

"Wh-what was that for?!" Kaho-chan cried. She reeled away, holding her forehead. Tears swam in her eyes (and mine too, for that matter).

"God, shut up! Stop blathering on and on with all that awful crap! I swear, I felt like my heart was going to explode and all my guts were going to spill out."

"But it's all true," she said.

I screamed, writhed in agony, and clamped my hands over my ears. There was a stinging bite to her words that pricked me all over until I looked like a hedgehog. The girl standing in front of me, the girl who looked at me in alarm, was none other than myself. She was the very same intimidated girl I was, the same one utterly confused and at a

loss of what to do after Mai and Ajisai-san asked me out.

"There's one thing in the whole world that I, for the life of me, can't stand," I said.

"R-Rena-chin?"

"And that's when someone puts themselves down when it's clear as day to anyone else that they're incredibly lucky and talented!"

I gritted my teeth. Then, locking eyes with Kaho-chan as she cowered, I roared, "Ugly? As if! What, are all your mirrors at home busted or something? You are objectively pretty as hell! How do you not know that?"

"No, I'm—"

"I get it! Trust me, I finally get it. I completely understand why you blew up at me that one time—you know, why you flipped out and headbutted me. I hundred percent get it! Believe me, I'm getting hit by the ricochet so hard I want to die, but I'll live."

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen, Kaho-chan. You're cuter than me, smarter than me, and more popular than I am. So when you put yourself down right in front of me, what does that make me? Chopped liver? If you're a water flea, am I a freaking paramecium?"

"I wasn't trying to imply that," she said.

"I know you weren't! But you did anyway. Social outcasts have to live their whole lives on the outskirts of society so they don't bother anyone else, huh? Just like the social outcasts they are, huh? Yup, I'm hearing you *loud* and clear there, girl! God, just shut up!"

Kaho-chan glared at me. "Okay, so if the girl who got asked out by Mai-Mai and Aa-chan at the *same frickin' time* is a paramecium, what do you have to do to qualify as a person? Be, like, the best First Lady there ever was? Get real!"

"Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeah! Now I get what you're saying. Not like, mentally, but emotionally. That's what you were trying to say earlier!"

People say the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, and I think that's a really apt phrase. I'm pretty sure we could cut down on a good 90 percent of conflicts the world over if we could experience all of someone else's problems from their perspective. For me, at least, I'd

experienced so many problems this past month, I think my poor mind would never recover from the hit. When Kaho-chan was so radiant and so devoted to following her dreams, what else was I supposed to do but want what she had? I thought she had no problems at all and just lived out day after day of her life enjoying endless fun. But at the same time, Kaho-chan wanted to be in *my* shoes, and every time I put myself down, Kaho-chan must have felt just wretched.

I looked into her eyes. “No matter what anyone says, you have what it takes to be onstage here. You’re always working your butt off, aren’t you? It doesn’t matter what other people think. Let them post as much hate as they want. You still want to enjoy this moment, right? You love cosplay, don’t you?”

“I mean, yeah, but still.” Kaho-chan looked daunted. She really was scared stiff.

“You do want to be up there, right? It’s your dream, isn’t it? So, come on. Stop making up excuses and list all the reasons you want to go through with this. You know that this is your big chance, right? You can’t let it slip away.”

The words came out smoothly, because these were all words I wanted to tell myself every day. There was zero chance that someone as amazing as Mai or Ajisai-san would ever come along and fall in love with me again. I couldn’t even wrap my head around how sinful it was to keep them waiting this long. If I was going to eventually look back and bemoan them falling out of love with me anyway, then I knew I should date them, even if it meant mucking it up in the process. Yeah. I got that. It was a nice, pretty, sound argument. And of course it hurt to hear it said out loud.

Kaho-chan looked down like there was an oppressive cloud hanging over her. “I know. I don’t need you to tell me all that. But…I just can’t. I don’t want people to laugh at me or flame me online.”

The two of us hunkered together, two tiny figures in that dim backstage area. Our turn steadily drew closer like the second hand ticking forward on a clock.

I took a deep breath to get enough oxygen to my heart. I was well aware of my own faults, and I detested it when people hated me. But even if Kaho-chan came to hate me for pushing her any further, I still wasn’t going to let that stop me.

“Hey, Kaho-chan,” I said. In the end, I just couldn’t stay silent. That’s because the version of me that I could actually like was still well ahead of me. So that the person who knew me better than anyone else —the person who watched over me 24/7, the person known as *Amaori Renako*—would someday stop hating me, I spoke up. “Let’s go, Kaho-chan. I’ll be with you, so you can do this.”

“Easy for you to say,” she said. “You have nothing to lose.”

“You’re right.” If we went through with this, Kaho-chan might have felt like everything she’d worked for was for nothing—all the love she’d put into her cosplay, all her supportive fans, everything she’d worked so hard to accomplish. I think it’d be like breaking up with a partner: everything you guys had built up over your time together turning into nothing in an instant. Gone. All the memories turned to scars to hurt you every time you looked back on them.

“But I can still imagine what it’s like to be in your shoes,” I said. I touched Kaho-chan’s cheek gently and tilted her head up. As I looked into her eyes, I told her, “If you back out now, you’re going to wish you hadn’t for the rest of your life. You’ll always tell yourself that you could have pulled it off if only you tried. And Kaho-chan, I’m really not about that life. No matter how mortifying it is when I screw up, I don’t want to run away from those things I really, really want to do.”

“Why?” she asked. “How can you think that?”

“Well.” Memories from this whole past half year came flooding back. Every day had been a succession of new challenges, and there were many, many days when it felt like all those challenges were insurmountable, days when I wept in bed in frustration. There were endless moments when I’d chickened out and ran away. However, when it all came down to it, I’d always resigned myself to my fate and faced things head on.

“Because I have love,” I said.

I loved my friends. And I loved the people who thought about me, the people who made me into the person I am today—everyone.

“Because I have love, and I don’t want to let that love down.”

The faces of all my loved ones came to mind, and when they

vanished, I had Kaho-chan and her big eyes right in front of me instead.

"Rena-chin…" she said. Timidly, she stretched her hand out. "I might screw this up, you know."

"Okay."

"I pretty much forgot everything we practiced. It's gonna really suck."

"Okay."

"I might turn out to be a huge pain in the butt for you."

"Okay." I gave her a big nod. "Trust me, right back at you." I took her hand and told her, "I've never been able to admit this to you before, but I'm terrified of people looking at me. I feel like everyone's thinking, 'Oh my god, she's so boring. Hurry up and get it over with already.'"

"Really?" Kaho-chan asked.

"I have, like, zero confidence I can pull this off. I mean, my hands are shaking, and I actually want to book it out of here ASAP. I feel like I'm going to vomit at any minute."

"But in spite of all that, you didn't run away. Thank you for staying with me."

She tugged me forward and wrapped me into a tight hug. "Let's go screw this up together," she said. "And then we can laugh over how bad we did. 'Cause you know, now that you're here with me, I don't feel so afraid anymore."

"Sounds like a plan," I said. I closed my eyes and felt Kaho-chan there with me. I knew I wasn't the only one whose heart threatened to beat right out of my chest. Kaho-chan and I were in sync, and it was like seeing myself in a mirror. Maybe she could only put forth half of her usual star power, but if you combined that with me and my half-assery, well. Together, we made one full person.

"I'm glad you're here with me," she whispered in my ear. Her voice quavered, sounding uncertain in a way that perky Kaho-chan didn't. However, I knew for sure that this was the voice of the Kaho-chan I'd heard long ago.

I forced myself to smile and sound upbeat.

"Yup. Now, come on," I said. "Let's go make some special

memories, just you and me.”

***

The event lady called our names, and we set off for the stage. The light shining down on it made it seem like the most beautiful place on the whole planet.

Minaguchi Kaho's Story

Unlike at school, Kaho was pretty sure you were allowed to bring manga to cram school, but it still surprised her to see the girl next to her with her nose in a manga magazine. Watching her was almost breathtaking. Her magazine was massive, the kind that boys would read, and every time the girl turned a page, her face changed from ecstatic joy to deep sorrow and vice versa so fast that Kaho couldn't keep up.

Eventually, the girl slammed the magazine shut, sighed, and then glanced in Kaho's direction. Oops. Now she knew that Kaho had been watching her in amusement. Embarrassed, Kaho looked away from behind her glasses.

"Hey, you wanna read it?" the other girl asked, offering the magazine.

Kaho was so surprised by the offer that she took the magazine without thinking. She couldn't believe that this girl could strike up a conversation with a complete stranger so casually.

"Well, I've never read anything like this before," Kaho admitted.

"Wait, for real?" the girl said. "Okay, then I have the perfect recommendation for you. Oh, wait, that'd be starting you partway through the series. Hmm. Oh, I know. I'll bring you the volumes tomorrow, and you can start there!"

Huh? Kaho was a bit put out by the speed at which the girl operated, but the girl didn't care. She flipped back to the table of contents and began lecturing Kaho on the entertainment value of each of the various series in it. Well, Kaho didn't *mind*, as she didn't have anything else to do before class started, but it was all a bit…you know.

"And so this guy, he's—oh my god," the girl went on. "He's so cool. And isn't he cute? You'd never guess by looking at him, but he's super nice and really loves his friends!"

She talked about him like she was in love with him, and Kaho found herself laughing before being drawn headlong into the conversation.

The girl quit cram school after a year, and unfortunately, Kaho never saw her again. However, her influence led Kaho into the habit of reading manga magazines on the regular. She looked forward to each Monday when they came out hot off the press. She drew pictures of her favorite characters and wrote fanfic about OCs in these fictional worlds. Before long, she was a full-fledged otaku girl, so perhaps it was inevitable that she stumbled across cosplay culture. Her mother was handy with a needle and thread and kept a sewing machine at home. Kaho herself had enjoyed making crafts with felt and beads ever since she was little, but it was only in her first year of junior high school that she nervously worked up the courage to make a costume for dressing up as her favorite character. She surreptitiously took a selfie with the smartphone her new stepmom had bought her and uploaded it to social media, whereupon she received an enormous volume of praise from viewers. Thus, thanks to the twin forces of her love for the franchises and her need for approval, she became enamored with cosplaying. As her cosplays progressed fruitfully and her love for the craft grew, her follower count steadily rose, and so did the number of familiar faces she recognized from each event she joined.

At the beginning, her love for cosplay and the enjoyment she felt from it seemed to her to be one and the same. But, as she joined more events and her follower count soared, those two things gradually became separate concepts. She loved it, but it was no longer just fun for her. More and more challenges presented themselves by the minute, and she became more preoccupied with the attention on her. Kaho found personal relationships a challenge; she thought her inherent personality wasn't right for them. She was shy and reserved, so she waffled over joining each and every event, worrying endlessly over not being the right fit for her costumes. She started to lose sight of what made cosplaying fun in the first place, and she grew so depressed, she considered giving it up altogether. It was only when she stepped into the shoes of her beloved fictional characters that she could hide her own insufficiencies.

Thus, after a lot of thought, Kaho came to a conclusion: why not cosplay constantly? It was a brilliant idea. Kaho made a new version of herself as a costume and chose to act as this character. The new Kaho was to be cheerful, charming, happy-go-lucky, and always decked out in

a smile. Sure, she'd be a little bit of an airhead, but she'd never say a bad word about anyone and would become the kind of girl everyone would adore.

Uh-huh. Just like the girl she'd known for half a year. *Yeah,* she thought. *I'm going to be like her.*

And from that day on, Kaho put in the work to make it happen. She had no idea that she would one day be reunited with her beloved "character" in high school.

Chapter 4:
There's No Freaking Way We Can Stay Like This Forever. Right?

AFTER KAHO-CHAN and I changed, we sat together in the food court of the event hall. Kaho-chan had her contacts back in and held out her phone for me to look at in horror.

"Well, what can ya do?" the girl onstage acting as Rina Bun chirped. "I mean, I'm so cute I just can't help it!" She forced herself to grin and, holding one ear up to her head like a bunny ear, boinged across the stage.

That alone was just about enough to do me in. Oh my goooo-ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo-ooooooooooooooooooooood.

"Hey, Kaho-chan," I said.

"Omg," she said. "We're getting dragged in the comments. They're losing their minds."

"Why must we subject ourselves to this?"

"Hm? You don't wanna see what people are saying?"

She was watching the VOD from the event's livestream earlier. The comments were popping up so fast I couldn't keep up, but I guess Kaho-chan was good at tracking moving visual objects.

Shortly afterward, Nagipo-chan came onstage in her catgirl maid costume. The two of us goofed off together like the good pals we were as we worked the maid café. Every day was a zany bundle of laughs. You know, I'd once thought that being more extroverted would get me some of those zany, bundle-of-laugh days too, but it ended up not working out that way. It turns out that the bad stuff comes in at the exact same rate as the good stuff. Maybe it was just that in *Anima Meido*, you never got to see all the stuff that went on backstage. And now that I thought about it like that, I realized I could actually relate to Rina Bun a bit more.

"Oh, look!" Kaho-chan said.

“Hm? Oh, is that Perman-san?”

The camera had panned over the audience for a split second, and I recognized one of the women in it. She was one of Kaho-chan’s whales, the one who’d come to photograph us at that private photoshoot.

“Yeah,” Kaho-chan said. “Miharu-san and Emma-san showed up too.”

“Wow, I didn’t notice at all. You really have a hardcore group of fans, Kaho-chan.”

Huh. Well, I guess I looked a bit better now than I did then. Come to think of it, there was something kind of, well, admirable about the girl onstage acting as a bunnygirl anime character.

When our performance was over, the beginning of the internet voting showed up on screen. After a break of fifteen minutes, the votes from fans both online and in person were tallied, and the winner was promptly picked. Kaho-chan fast-forwarded us right to the end.

“And without further ado,” said the announcer, “our grand winner is none other than—”

Well, it wasn’t us. Nor was it Serara-chan and her partner. I figured the person the announcer listed must be some famous figure, and I looked at Kaho-chan to see how she was taking the news. “That’s too bad,” I said.

“Not really,” she replied. “Sure, we got 7th out of 8, but that’s just what you’re gonna get when you’re not super well known, y’know? ’Sides, we should be thankful that 854 people chose us as their top picks overall!”

Grinning, she pointed at the vote total of 854 on the screen. A pessimist would never have been able to look at this with such a glass-half-full approach, so I was impressed. Well, but still.

“That could just be because they’re all fans of *Anima Meido,*” I pointed out.

“Oh, come on, why do you gotta be such a party pooper? Whatever, it works out in our favor, so just roll with it.”

I couldn’t argue with that one. Darn it! So much for me one-upping her before. I guess I really wouldn’t ever be able to beat Kaho-chan, not when she was cosplaying as an optimist.

At any rate, we were hanging around the convention center even after our show was done, because Kaho-chan wanted to see the main event happening near the end of the day. I'd been too nervous the whole time to really enjoy the convention itself, so I was down for making some happy memories—at the end if nothing else—as well.

"I gotta say," I said, "it feels really weird to be sitting around in cosplay drinking tea."

"Nah, isn't it fun to wear costumes in public? I wish they'd let us cosplay at school."

"Mai would just destroy all the competition."

"Yeah, but that'd be awesome," she said. "Cosplayers love cosplaying, but we also love to see awesome cosplayers too!"

Kaho-chan's eyes lit up, but I, for one, was not ready to sit at the table dressed like a bunny maid. I snuck glances all around to see if other people were watching. To be fair, most people were cosplayers too, so I guess I didn't stand out. Like for instance, there was a girl sitting diagonally in front of me who was…

"Wait, isn't that Satsuki-san?!" I said.

Yup. That was Satsuki-san, still in the same costume I'd last seen her in.

"I have no idea who this 'Satsuki-san' of whom you speak is," she said. "My name is Moon."

"Right, sorry. But what the heck are you doing here?"

Moon-san was sitting with her looooong legs crisscrossed and a book open on the table in front of her. Across from her sat another girl who was not, inexplicably enough, Serara-chan.

"Serara went home first," Moon-san said. "And she has my clothes."

"Wait, what?"

Moon-san frowned in a way that was very becoming. "It wasn't smart of us to bring only the one suitcase. I tried calling her, but as she won't pick up, I'm afraid I'm stuck here. Oh well. I'm sure she has other things to do, and life is fleeting, after all."

"Fleeting? Girl, she was straight-up fleeing," Kaho-chan said. "Okay, Serara Se-La La Land. Yeah, I know she's got places to go and

all, but jeez. What's she acting like Santa Claus on Christmas Eve for?"

"I don't know about that," Moon-san said, "but she seemed rather shaken up when we didn't win. She was quite dazed and upset for a while."

"Oh, right…" Kaho-chan crossed her arms and made a noise as if she'd just remembered something. "Yeah, she's pretty individualistic, huh. I don't think she's ever been in a ranked competition before."

"Have you crossed paths with her a lot?" I asked.

"Yeah. She won't tell you, but I was the one who showed her the ropes back at her first event. Back then, she used to follow me around like a puppy going, 'Hey, senpai, senpai!' She was really cute."

"Wow, really?"

Kaho-chan clutched her cup full of pineapple juice, an item off this anime collaboration menu, and said dreamily, "Yeah, and eventually she got really full of herself. It's all about youth and -appearance in the cosplay world, y'see. I mean, there's more to it than that, of course, but the moment someone gets more followers than you, it's, like, an instant about-face. Talk to the hand, y'know?"

"That's freaky."

I was a stranger to this sort of feminine environment. Ashigaya was good enough for me, thank you very much. So long as I stayed a member of the quintet, I didn't have to worry about some young upstart trying to climb the ranks and topple our leader.

"But she takes cosplay seriously 'cause she wants to grow up to be a model," Kaho-chan went on. "To be real with you, I've never hated her, even now that we're fighting all the time. Okay, but our opinions on anime have *never* aligned!"

Kaho-chan gave me a senpai-ish grin. She seemed so relaxed and confident that I was impressed, but I couldn't help but think Serara-chan wasn't a fan. It probably felt like Kaho-chan was looking down on her or treating her like a kid.

"I don't particularly dislike her either," Moon-san sniffed, "but I wish she hadn't walked off with my clothes."

"Wait, so what're you even going to do, Moon-san?" I asked. "You can't exactly get on the train in costume. Oh! I could go change and buy you a normal shirt or something if you want."

Still in her soldier get-up, Moon-san repositioned her assault rifle leaning up against the table and scowled. “Please. It would be a waste of money to go out and buy a shirt just for this.”

Urgh. *Well, you’re the boss, Miss Penny Pincher,* I thought. It didn’t feel right to insist that I’d pay, so I wasn’t sure what to do next.

“It’s fine,” she said. “You needn’t worry on my behalf. I can borrow a change of clothes from a contact of mine. However, I’ll have to wait until said contact is done with her stage show, so until then, I’m passing the time here.”

“Oh, okay. That’s good to hear. This contact is a cosplayer friend of yours, I’m guessing?”

“I have no such thing,” said Moon-san.

Huh… But just then, I realized that I’d interrupted Moon-san’s conversation with the other girl at her table, so I apologized and bowed to the person sitting across from her.

“I-it’s fine,” she said. She wouldn’t look at me. Instead, she scrunched in on herself nervously.

…Wait a minute. I was not usually the most astute, but my Spidey-senses were tingling. Something was up with this girl.

I quickly ducked around Moon-san to get a closer look at her. Her costume was a pretty, well-tailored qipao—bold, certainly, but it looked great on her.

“Oh! Ah.” She whipped her head away, her ears bright red.

“Hm?” I moved too and tried to get a closer look at her. The girl turned away again and guarded her face. We repeated this little back-and-forth several times, going around in circles.

“What the heck are you up to now, Rena-chin?” Kaho-chan groaned.

Believe me, I wouldn’t normally be this hung up on a stranger either. But…

I whispered, “Hey, are you Ajisai-san?”

The girl jumped exaggeratedly.

“Huh?” Kaho-chan said. “Why would Aa-chan be in a place like thi—”

But then the girl interrupted Kaho-chan by lifting her head. Resigned to her fate, she raised one small hand and said, “Yeah, it’s me. Sena Ajisai.”

“Huh?!” Kaho-chan screeched. Her eyes opened as wide as saucers. “What’re you doing here?! What’s a nice goody-goody like you doing at a gathering of antisocial weirdos? At a frickin’ *anime convention*?”

“Hey, you’re going to piss people off!” I said. What was she thinking, yelling that in a convention center? But everyone around us just looked pensive, like they were going “Well, she has a point.” *Come on, guys, you aren’t antisocial weirdos!*

“But for real,” Kaho-chan said, “why’re you here?”

“Oh. Um. A friend invited me to come along.” And so she just decided to cosplay, huh? In a skimpy little qipao with a big honking slit up the side? *Okay, I see how it is.* Did that mean if I’d asked her along, she’d have worn those cute clothes for *me*?

“Your friend being Moon-san?” I asked. “Wait, Moon-san, you invited her?”

I could not begin to imagine Moon-san texting Ajisai-san, “I’m going to cosplay, so come watch.” If anything, she seemed more like the type to go, “If you come watch, I’ll end your life.”

“I would not,” she said.

“Stop reading my mind!”

“I’m not. You’re an open book is all,” Moon-san said. “At any rate, I’m not the one who extended the invitation. I just happened to run into Sena here coincidentally.”

Moon-san produced a Makuhari Cosplay Summit pamphlet from somewhere on her person. “See? It says here that the main event will feature the appearance of a special guest.”

“Who? Ajisai-san?!” I cried. I mean, I could see that. If you were going to rank every high schooler in the city, Ajisai-san’s kindness and beauty would net her a spot in the top ten. Nah, scratch that, she’d probably take first place.

So calling her a special guest didn’t strike me as all that odd, but Ajisai-san yelled, “No! It’s not me. It’s, uh. Um.” She looked worried and fiddled with her fingers. The cuteness factor here was off the charts.

“Satsuki-chan, how am I supposed to handle this?” she said. She looked to Moon-san in a helpless plea to be bailed out; if the same look had been turned on me, it would have vaporized me on the spot. “Oh, um, I’m sorry, Satsuki-chan. Wait, that’s not right. Is it Moon-chan? I’m not supposed to call you by your real name, right?”

“…It’s fine. I don’t particularly mind.” Moon-san looked embarrassed, a completely different look from her usual evil smirk. “You can call me my given name.”

“Oh, really? So, it’s okay to still call you Satsuki-chan?” Ajisai-san sounded shocked.

Moon-san nodded slightly. “Sure.”

That made Ajisai-san giggle. Moon-san looked down at her book in an attempt to hide her embarrassment. Kaho-chan and I exchanged glances. How come Ajisai-san got such preferential treatment but we didn’t?

Kaho-chan wasted no time in protesting and pointing at Moon-san. “What’s all this about, Moon-chan? How come you only play favorites with Aa-chan?!”

“I’m not playing favorites,” Moon-san said.

“Then doesn’t that mean we can call you Satsuki-san too?” I asked. “Look, I don’t know jack about how cosplay works. You know that. Right, Satsuki-san?”

Moon-san whacked us both on the head in turns with her book. “Shut up, Dumb and Dumber,” she said.

“You’re so mean!” Kaho-chan and I whined in unison as we clutched our foreheads.

Satsuki-san glared at us like we were her teammates dragging her down. “Perhaps your limited vocabulary prevents you from labeling this as anything other than ‘playing favorites,’ but you are incorrect. There is a clear difference. The value of a request depends not upon how it is said but upon who makes it. As this request came from Sena, I chose to honor it. End of discussion.”

“That’s legit the definition of playing favorites,” I put in.

“I insist, you’re wrong. Imagine, say, that you and Sena were objectively as good as each other—not whatever Oduka Mai has taken it upon herself to think—and I still gave her preferential treatment. *That*

would be playing favorites. But you aren't, and I'm not. Correct?"

"Y-yeah, okay."

Yeah, when compared to the angel of Ashigaya High, no *Homo sap.* could ever proudly declare, "Yup, she can't beat me!"

Moon-san smirked in derision. "Good, I'm glad to see you finally understand. Listen up, Amaori. You may have had a run of good luck recently, but don't let it fool you. I don't particularly like you as a person in any way, shape, or form."

"Hey, Satsuki-chan," Ajisai-san said. She frowned slightly and looked at Satsuki-san. "Sorry for interrupting, but… Thanks for thinking so much of me, but this is going too far. You don't need to be so harsh on Rena-chan."

"That's true." Moon-san immediately bowed. Wait, Moon-san bowed?! "My apologies. I'm afraid I wasn't paying enough attention to what I was saying and inadvertently hurt you again. You're a very dear friend of mine, and I hope we can continue to be such good friends."

"Wait, why're you being so nice now?" I protested. The fact that Satsuki-san meekly accepted Ajisai-san's request and *apologized* came as such a shock that I didn't even have the time to feel offended. I mean, like. Hello? What did all this mean? Were these two dating? Did Aji × Satsu have a chance?

To round it all off, Ajisai-san gave her a soft smile and said, "Wow, I'm impressed. That was a great apology."

Satsuki-san looked away again, blushing. "It wasn't all that."

"Look, I get that Saa-chan really respects Aa-chan, but I dunno," grumbled Kaho-chan. "Something doesn't add up." Honestly, I wanted to agree with her so hard that I'd look like a person head banging at a rock concert.

"So if it wasn't Moon-san," I said, returning to the topic at hand, "who invited you here, Ajisai-san?" This was my pro strat for putting my head on straight and canceling out all the psychic damage I'd accrued by going back to where the conversation had started.

For a moment, Ajisai-san seemed to be at a loss for words. She looked deep in thought for a moment before saying, "Well. About that."

Just then, all the lights dimmed. *Hmm?* I looked around, and a screen hanging from the ceiling began showing a preview stream. After

some performers, they announced the special guest. I guess they were showing the backstage area, as there was a girl getting her makeup done onscreen. She had long golden hair. She was a fixed star, a constant reference point shedding light against the backdrop of the other celestial objects about her, a girl like the sun.

"Thank you for having me today," she said, tipping her audience a wink. The crowd erupted into shrill screams.

I went slack-jawed, my eyes fixed on the screen. "Th-that's Oduka Mai…"

"It's Mai-Mai!" Kaho-chan shrieked, immediately joining the rest of the frenzied audience.

"Y-yeah." Ajisai-san nodded. "That's the one."

Oh, I got it now. Mai had invited Ajisai-san along. Wait. What was Mai doing inviting Ajisai-san? What was the connection here? I mean, they were both pals, so I guess they went to hang out together and stuff. But, like, the two of them alone?

"And there you have it," Satsuki-san said. Now I got what was up with her too. Knowing Mai, she must have come with tons of clothes to change into, and once Satsuki-san heard from Ajisai-san that Mai was here, she must have decided to hitch a ride home with Mai. They lived pretty close to each other, after all.

But my slight confusion about the Mai/Ajisai-san connection was drowned out by the excitement of everyone in the venue. Kaho-chan bunched her hands into fists in delight. "Hey, let's go check out the stage right now! Mai-Mai's gonna be there! I really, really wanna see her! C'mon, let's go grab front row seats!"

"Huh? Oh, okay."

The people at the other tables were getting up and filing out to the main stage too. I leaped to my feet as Kaho-chan tried to hurry me up.

"Oh, wait!" I said. "Ajisai-san, you should come too."

"Oh, uh, okay. Sure." Ajisai-san was usually down to come along for the ride at times like this. She got up and then reached out a hand to Satsuki-san. "We have to go. Come on, Satsuki-chan, you too. Hurry."

"M-me too?" she said. "I don't know. I mean, I have no particular reason to go. I've seen more of her work than I can stomach." But

Satsuki-san was so weak to Ajisai-san's charms that she also couldn't shake off her hand. "O-oh, very well. I suppose I'll go."

"Great!"

And so all four of us set off in a stampede, hastening to the main stage.

"This is awesome!" Kaho-chan said. "It's a big gathering of the quintet."

"Yeah, what a nice coincidence," said Ajisai-san.

"I don't know about that," Satsuki-san sniffed. "I see plenty of you at school already, so surely there's no need to get together on the weekends as well."

"Come on, don't be like that, Satsuki-san," I said. Now I was grinning too, and at the top of my lungs, I exclaimed:

"This is *fun*!"

We jostled and shoved our way in. Luck was on our side, as we were able to secure front row seats for ourselves, where we waited in impatient excitement for the event to begin—Kaho-chan, Ajisai-san, Satsuki-san, and I. Come to think of it, I realized that we'd never all hung out on a weekend before. Someone was always busy, and our schedules never lined up. But I guess we were finally getting closer to one another after a whole good six months.

We were surrounded by a sea of other audience members, all of them with light in their eyes as they waited for Mai. Then they screamed as a spotlight blinked on onstage. And there she was: the star model of Apparel Brand Queen Rose, making a dramatic entrance in cosplay. Of course, she outshone everyone at the convention in her gorgeous Chinese-style dress. The sight of her reminded me of the time at that fashion show over summer vacation. With her long, long legs and high waist, she looked just like an actress. She was, I thought, the most beautiful girl in the world.

"Why, hello, ladies and gentlemen," she said, mic in hand. "Is everyone having a good time today at the Makuhari Cosplay Summit?"

Even as every eye in the room was trained on her, Mai conducted

herself with grace. I'm sure that came down to the fact that she'd been on TV before, and she must have been the center of attention at even larger venues than this one. What I mean is that life depends on building up EXP, like in RPGs.

"I'm afraid I've never had an opportunity to act as someone else or cosplay before," Mai went on, "but I'm having a wonderful time trying it now. It feels quite similar to delighting in fashion."

She showed off her outfit and grinned. "I remember being a little girl and having someone buy for me a favorite outfit. Whenever I wore it, the whole world seemed brighter than usual. I felt prouder, more confident. That must be what it feels like to cosplay, isn't it?"

Her kind, gentle voice spread from the stage and hit home with all of us. When I glanced to the side, I saw Kaho-chan looking up at Mai in dazed admiration. I knew that I shouldn't compare myself to the likes of Mai, but it hit me once again that Mai really and truly was incredible. Every time I learned something new about her, I felt a vague sensation of her sheer status, like an echo—a reminder of just how far ahead of me she was. Whether it was working hard on academics, going up onstage, or even expressing her love to a certain someone, everything Mai did was done well. But maybe even Mai hadn't been able to do this all perfectly right off the bat.

"Mai-chan," Ajisai-san whispered, a trace of something fervent in her voice. I turned to look at her and found her large eyes shining with tears as she looked up at Mai. My heart skipped a beat. It reminded me of the time on our way home from summer vacation when she'd started sobbing.

"A-Ajisai-san?" I asked.

"Hm?" Ajisai-san blushed. "O-oh, never mind. I was just thinking about how pretty she looks, that's all."

"O-okay."

At that moment, about all I thought was *Wow, Ajisai-san gets emotional pretty quickly*. I didn't read too deeply into it, maybe because Mai's dazzling stage appearance had robbed me of my ability to maintain a coherent train of thought.

"We'll now proceed to the highlights of today's event, but first, I'd like to introduce another special guest," Mai said. "I know I'm used to receiving flowers onstage, but this time I'd like to receive a *literal* flower

in the form of my good friend. Please give her a warm welcome."

And then Mai looked in our direction. I guess she must have known the whole time that we were here; this was the front row, after all. She stepped away from the mic and beckoned. "Please come up, Ajisai."

"Okay," Ajisai-san said.

Wait, huh? Ajisai-san left her seat and began to walk to the stage. Wait, was that why Ajisai-san was in costume?

Then, as I watched Ajisai-san walk away from me, Satsuki-san suddenly grabbed my wrist and yanked me with all her might.

"Bwuh?" I spluttered. I pitched forward as Satsuki-san pulled me to her chest. The costume's fabric felt stiff, almost hard. "Wh-what is this all about?"

I looked up, and for an instant, Satsuki-san looked confused about what she'd just done. But then she immediately bit her lip and said, "You need to go too."

"What?!" That was the most absurd request I'd ever heard in my life. "What're you even saying, Satsuki-san?"

That made zero sense, and besides, Mai hadn't asked for me in the first place. Mai was doing a job right now, so even if I did try to go up, I was sure to be stopped backstage and sent straight to security.

I was about to point that out too, but Satsuki-san killed the words rising in my throat with the force of her glare alone.

"Don't argue with me," she said. "Go already."

"Nope," I said. "Nope, nope, nope." Nope, there was no freaking way I could.

I made to sit my butt back down ASAP, but Satsuki-san wouldn't let go of me no matter what. What was this all about?

Ajisai-san stopped, probably because she'd heard Satsuki-san, and turned back to look.

"Oh, sorry, Ajisai-san," I said. "Just ignore us."

The hand on her chest clenched. She said, "Rena-chan…I'd like you to come too."

"Huh?"

I was baffled. I mean, what for?

Ajisai-san reached out to me. “Please,” she said.

What was the point of all this?

“It’s to help Mai,” Ajisai-san said.

Help her? I was pretty sure I’d only bother her!

“Rena-chan, it wouldn’t work without you.”

The earnestness in her voice was messing me up. “I mean, I’d like to help Mai, but…” Caught in between Satsuki-san and Ajisai-san like this, I didn’t have a clue what to do. I mean, Mai could get by just fine without me. She was fantastic enough, magnificent enough on her own —

But as I was torn, I looked up at the stage, and Mai’s eyes met mine. Just then, I felt like I could hear a voice.

Well, what if you gave it some thought, and this was the result?

You know, I *like you.*

Mai always had everything together. She was strong. And that’s why—that’s why I wondered why she chose me, of all people.

Just then, Kaho-chan shoved me into the aisle toward Ajisai-san and cried, “I can’t watch!”

I yelped.

“I’m not okay with this, not one bit! But if you’re gonna do it, get it over with already. C’mon. Break a leg!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” I said. I inadvertently grabbed Ajisai-san’s hand.

And then Ajisai-san yelled like I’d slapped her. “Rena-chan, Mai-chan’s been waiting for your answer longer than anyone else in the whole world!”

Mai’s frail smile danced on the back of my eyelids before vanishing. Oh, for Pete’s sake!

“Fine!” I said. “This is ridiculous, but fine! I’ll go.”

I gave Ajisai-san’s hand a tug. A glimmer of something like

sadness shone in her eyes before it vanished as quickly as it had appeared. She smiled and gave me a big nod. “Okay.”

I mean, I had to talk to her at some point anyway. So, sooner or later, I had to go—to her. To Mai.

But no one said anything about talking to her on-freaking-stage!

Fine, fine, I’m going already, I thought. *Off to the stage where Mai awaits.*

Chapter 5 Preface:
Otherwise Known as Mai's Side of the Story

A PERMANENT LIE is just one more name for the truth.

The following is a love story of one particular girl we all know and love.

She was strong, beautiful, and intelligent. She brimmed with confidence, was admired by her peers, and seldom succumbed to her emotions. Nothing daunted her, no matter the odds. She could overcome any obstacle under her own steam and always looked ahead to the future with a noble attitude. She was Oduka Mai—Ashigaya's supadari, a sun who shone with her own unique light.

But was that the truth? Renako must have known it wasn't. She knew everyone had problems of their own, both big and small, and everyone struggled with their own issues as they moved on in life. Personality and social standing made no difference here. She understood that one must strive, and toil, and fight on through all the tears, but never ever cease to put one foot forward after another.

***

Or perhaps she knew that was true for all 7.8 billion people on the planet, save the one exception: Oduka Mai.

What you are about to read is a story that Amaori Renako knew absolutely nothing about and will never ever find out about for so long as she lives. That's because this story is one about the girl who fell in love with her, and this is the way she wanted to keep it.

Chapter 5 Volume 1:
After the Party

"WHAT POSSESSED you to do that?" Mai's mother asked.

She had freshly arrived in Japan that evening, and she and her daughter were eating dinner together at a restaurant. Her mother, Mai realized, must have learned not long after the fact that she'd rented out a hotel hall in order to host a party.

Mai picked up and bit into a nearby hors d'oeuvre, unruffled. The acidity of the olive marinade was so strong it made her eyes open wide. To be frank, she wasn't a fan.

"I suppose I'm at the age now where one does these things," Mai said.

Despite being half-Japanese herself, Mai's mother spent most of the year in France and spoke with her daughter largely in French, self-conscious of her Japanese language skills. Every comment, every discussion about Mai's schedule, and every work instruction came delivered in French.

"I can't have you running amok," she admonished. "You're still a student, you know."

"Yes, *Maman*. I understand that it is my responsibility to represent Queen Rose as its model. I will not be so rash from now on."

"Please. I'd prefer not to be bothered in my office in Paris by all the nonsense happening here in Tokyo."

The clinking of moving utensils occupied the silence between them for several moments.

"As for our next order of business," Mai's mother continued, "you will be quite busy this summer, as I notified you previously. I've given your manager Hanatori the schedule with details."

"Very well. And might I ask how business is going this year?"

"You may. For the most part, our sales are not performing badly. However, these designs are another story. They are far from masterpieces; all we are doing is reusing old ideas."

Mai's mother, Oduka Renée, was the top designer at Queen Rose. The company's achievements were directly correlated to her intellect and skill, and as the company grew larger year after year, so too the pressure on Renée mounted. Only in the past few years had she begun to talk to Mai about work, perhaps because she could no longer bear the burden of responsibility alone. Yet with that being said, the most Mai could do was listen to her mother's complaints, like so.

"In recent years, my biggest source of inspiration has been your growth," Mai's mother continued. "As you leave my hands, I feel as if your face is being replaced by that of another person's creation altogether. It's a new, exciting experience."

"You and I are fundamentally different people, *Maman*," Mai reminded her.

"Yes, and I was made well aware of that by your rebellion when you were ten."

"Calling it a rebellion is an exaggeration," Mai said with a wry grin. Her mother was not the best at expressing her feelings, to the point that Mai wondered if this was why she had become a designer. Talking with someone when she had no idea how they truly felt put Mai in mind of eating a salad made with ingredients she didn't like. She took each bite fearfully, never knowing which one might taste bitter.

"But you see, *on n'a qu'une vie,*" Mai's mother continued. "We only have one life in which to live. I don't regret my decisions, and I don't want you to have to either. That's why you must exercise prudence when you act, *ma chérie*."

"…Yes, *Maman*," Mai said.

She'd heard her mother say this many times before. She knew it was for her own good, but what it really meant was this:

You talk about me not regretting my decisions, Mai thought. *But is that not the same as you telling me to copy you?*

Disregarding Japan, Mai was too petite at her height of 167 cm to stand out among the top models in France. There, outgoing blonde girls were a dime a dozen, and fundamentally speaking, Mai didn't have the talent to make it as a top-level model overseas. The only reason she occupied this role was because she was her mother's beloved, exquisite daughter. For that sole reason, many, many other talented young people were pushed aside to let Mai stand at the top of the Japanese modeling

world. Many, many people lost to Mai and gave up on their dreams. Thus, Mai felt she had to be strong for all their sakes, the sakes of everyone she defeated. She could not be permitted to lose her footing and slip off the top of the pyramid.

But to Mai, the fact that she was a model kept her pinned down to the fact of being Renée's daughter. She did not design her own life, for even that was another one of her mother's creations. Only once in her life had Mai ever plotted her own course, in that moment her mother had termed a rebellion.

"If you're ready to settle down and find a partner, say the word and I'll make the arrangements. There's no need to be shy," her mother said. "For you know, you are my dear, beloved daughter."

"…Thank you, *Maman*," Mai said.

But even as the night stretched on and Mai dined with the person who knew her better than anyone else, the only thing filling her stomach was a sense of emptiness.

Chapter 5 Volume 2:
After the Defeat

"I LOST," Mai said, and she giggled to herself. "I really lost. Oh, I'm a loser, loser, loser."

After both Renako and Satsuki left, Mai remained slumped in her chair for a time as her will to live vanished. They'd all tried as hard as they could in this three-way battle to win Renako's hand in marriage, and it'd ended in failure for Mai. Crushing failure, no less. Losing was a new experience for her. As far as she could recall, she'd never lost this spectacularly at anything before, but now here she was: a big, fat loser.

Hanatori looked on at the defeated warrior in pity. "Miss, would you like me to bring you a warm drink?"

Mai chuckled, her eyes still distant. "Yes, thank you, Hanatori-san."

Even now, Mai never failed to be polite, and Hanatori respected her greatly for that. She poured Mai a different flavor of tea, a lavender herb variety. It smelled lovely, with a Mai-appropriate level of elegance, and Hanatori hoped it would help restore some of her wounded spirits. She placed the cup down

beside Mai with a clink and was about to melt back into the shadows, as was her wont, but when she noticed her charge looking so out of sorts, she couldn't help but offer a few words of encouragement.

"Pardon me for my presumption, mistress," Hanatori said, "but I do believe Amaori-sama has played this game for much longer than you. Therefore, I don't believe you need be so upset."

"No, Hanatori-san, that's not right." Mai shook her head. "Regardless of what kind of competition it was, I went into it with everything I had from the moment I accepted her challenge. Now that I've lost, I cannot come up with excuses just to make myself feel better."

"M-my apologies, mistress!" Hanatori turned pale and covered her mouth. "I am most sorry for tarnishing your pure, noble spirit, mistress. I'll gladly accept any punishment you see fit. Please, I await your orders."

She kneeled to the floor, but Mai merely smiled at her gently. “It’s quite all right, Hanatori-san. You were only trying to make me feel better, and I always appreciate your kindness. Oh, yes, that’ll do for an order. Please continue to be such a help to me.”

“Oh, mistress!” Hanatori almost pulled Mai into a hug, but, as that would have been quite disrespectful, she contented herself with folding her hands as in prayer.

Mai hugged her legs to herself as she sat in the chair. Resting her cheek on her knee, she mumbled, “Why, I have an idea. Perhaps I should talk to you about Renako.”

“Please do. I am all ears,” said Hanatori.

Mai giggled. “Come now, don’t frown so. Do you recall when *Maman* offered me the choice of staying in Japan or going to France with her for high school?”

Remembering Mai’s years in junior high, Hanatori smiled gently. “I do. You did me the great honor of confiding in me then as well.”

“Yes, I remember that too. You urged me to choose France on the basis that I’d stand out too much here for my name and hair color.”

“Yes, mistress. And had you done so, you would have been with your family.”

Hanatori remembered that time period well, as it had left the normally cheerful Mai broody and thoughtful. Hanatori herself was so concerned about her charge that she lost three kilos. She was prepared to move to France too if she must, and she urged Mai to make that choice for her own good.

Mai tilted her teacup. “However,” she said, “I chose to study in Japan.”

Perhaps it was another minor rebellion against her mother. However, Hanatori now thought Mai had made the right choice, because it meant that Koto-sama was one of Mai’s classmates.

The story Satsuki had shared of her childhood with Mai moved Hanatori to the point that, had she not been in front of the mistress and her friends, she would have cried like a baby. So long as Koto Satsuki was there, Mai would never be alone. And with that faith in this true love, Hanatori’s heart was set at ease. However…

Fundamentally speaking, neither girl is the kind of person to need

someone else, she thought. *I suppose they have the sort of friendship wherein they aren't close on an everyday basis.* Mai and Satsuki were close in a distant sort of way and yet familiar in their distance. The thing Mai needed was not a rival to push herself to be better physically and mentally. She needed someone around whom she could let her guard down, even if this someone was only mediocre.

"And then I met Renako," Mai said, her sentence making Hanatori feel like she'd cut her finger on a knife.

"That young lady, mistress?" Hanatori asked. Only loyalty to her mistress prevented her from breaking out more colorful language. Amaori Renako: an all-around ordinary girl physically and mentally, one who'd never shown Hanatori evidence of possessing any special traits whatsoever. Girls like her were everywhere in high school and college. Granted, Hanatori didn't think Mai was any less experienced in judging people's character than Hanatori herself. Her lack of major milestones aside, Mai had the pleasure of meeting many charming people ever since she was a child, which must have given her a discerning eye for only the finest of people. So that begged the question: why was Mai so infatuated with this Renako girl?

"I was nervous about starting a new chapter in life and whether or not I would fit in at school," Mai said. "Yes, Hanatori-san, I was as anxious as anyone else, doubly so as I'd refused *Maman*'s invitation and chosen to stay here in Japan. No matter what, I didn't want to someday think I'd made the wrong choice."

"My…sympathies, mistress," Hanatori said.

Renée was a fine employer, but she too often made decisions without anyone else's input. Even Hanatori couldn't presume to guess what she really wanted, and it almost appeared that Renée didn't want to talk to her daughter at all, even if mother and daughter were each the only family the other had.

"I've been so used to all my classmates watching me from afar and handling me with kid gloves," Mai said. "However, that did not stop me from wanting to enjoy high school just like anybody else. It was just a little wish of mine, but the fear it would never come to pass upset me greatly."

"Oh, I see."

Mai hadn't shown that fear to anyone, not even to Hanatori, and

she was only mentioning it now that it was all over and done with. Hanatori felt that she would never get over the frustration that Mai refused to approach her earlier.

"But then *she* appeared," Mai said, "and blew all my worries away."

"The aforementioned young lady?"

Mai lifted her head like a budding shoot poking out of the snowmelt.

"She asked me if we could be friends."

"Goodness," said Hanatori. Not many people were capable of taking the initiative and speaking to Oduka Mai first, particularly if it was not merely out of idle curiosity. Hanatori was well and truly taken aback.

"Now that I look back on it," Mai mused, "I wonder if that was the moment I fell in love with her."

"Oh, mistress…"

"Hanatori-san," Mai vowed, directly before Hanatori, "I promise that I'll someday become the kind of girl she deserves."

"…Very well, mistress."

Mai was devoted to the point of infatuation, and thus Hanatori, too, was just about to put her full faith in Mai's vow and support the romance between her and Renako, when—

Well, I don't need to go that *far,* she thought. For the time being, she decided to use the reasonable amount of funds she'd accrued from her hours of hard labor and put in a request with a private eye to have the girl investigated. She needed to see exactly what it was this Amaori Renako was made of and why she'd tried to approach Hanatori's mistress. If she turned out to be a pest threatening the fine flowers, then Hanatori would have to act.

But at any rate, she *had* been the first to expel Mai's fears right after the start of high school. Hanatori could, if nothing else, give her the credit for that.

Chapter 5 Volume 3:
After Ajisai Asked Renako Out

It was the end of summer vacation, with the second trimester just around the corner, as Satsuki arrived home from work. “I’m home,” she called, and her eyes alighted upon an unfamiliar pair of shoes in the entranceway. She looked down at them without so much as lifting an eyebrow. An unfamiliar pair of shoes in her entranceway reminded her, oddly enough, of her childhood.

She opened the door with a rattle and found a girl folded in on herself, facing the wall. Only her blonde hair reflecting in the light had its usual gleam.

“Ah ha,” said Satsuki. “What do we have here? A big child who’s only mature in the physical sense?”

Mai didn’t respond.

Satsuki sighed and put away her bag. While she was at it, she also packed it ready for tomorrow. It was all such a hassle to try to do anything when she was tired, so she always tried to tidy up and have everything squared away beforehand.

While Satsuki worked, Mai didn’t move a muscle, becoming just another element of the decor. Satsuki knew Mai wouldn’t do anything unless she spoke first. Really, what a horrible pain Mai was. Satsuki dearly wanted to reference their previous conversation and say, “I thought you weren’t going to rely on me anymore?” but even she wasn’t mean enough for that.

Instead, she said, “So, what do you want? What is it now?”

She poured herself a cup of instant coffee and came back to Mai. Mai made no response, so Satsuki decided to open up her textbooks. It was only after she’d done that when, a few moments later, Mai said, “I don’t think there’s anyone the whole world over who likes me.”

Satsuki stayed silent. She almost booted Mai out the door, but no. It was okay. She could handle this. If her temper was *that* short, she’d never have made it as a longtime friend of Mai.

“Your point being?” Satsuki said.

“Oh, no, never mind. I’m sure there must be people who like me. Of course there are some. Why, even when I don’t do anything, people like me.”

Nah, Satsuki was gonna kick her out for real. Whatever was bothering Mai must not have been that bad after all.

But as soon as that thought crossed Satsuki’s mind, Mai said, “It’s just that they don’t like me *best*.”

The loneliness in her voice was palpable. Satsuki turned to look over her shoulder, and when Mai lifted her head, the look in her eyes made her seem like a chastised child. This was the Oduka Mai that she showed no one in the world save for Satsuki.

“What happened now?” Satsuki asked. “Tell me.”

It was rare these days to see Mai this upset. It wasn’t that she’d made an effort to stop relying on Satsuki since starting high school, but rather that her mental health had improved overall.

Satsuki realized that studying was a wash, stopped her pen, and turned to face Mai.

Mai still had a hard time getting the words out, but it was too late to back out now. She was already at Satsuki’s house. “You see…” she began, and then, falteringly, she relayed the whole story to Satsuki.

The news, naturally, came as quite a surprise. “Sena?” Satsuki repeated. “She asked Amaori out? Are you serious?”

True, Ajisai had seemed to be quite taken with Renako, but still! Satsuki had always assumed it was a simple extension of friendship and had never expected Ajisai to do anything about it. Satsuki had always been perceptive and could often guess what others were thinking to the point that she came across as a mind reader. Although she hated to admit it, she felt like she had inherited this from her mother, who got around in life on pure social skills alone. But being able to read a situation and being able to offer a role that a particular situation required were two completely different skills. Thanks to her abundant talent in the former, Satsuki chose her friends carefully and often elected to spend her free time indulging in a good book instead. It was like someone with too-good eyesight living on a narrow city street, as thoughtless interactions were nothing but exhausting to her. Satsuki just wanted to live her days in peace and quiet. Her current friend group were all—well, relatively speaking—drama-free, and Satsuki-san liked

them fine enough. They were the sort of friends she'd like to have stick around. Sena definitely numbered one of that bunch, and as for Amaori…well, Satsuki would get back to that later.

"I see," she said. "Now I understand what's going on." She now understood Amaori's misdeeds. "So, this means that Amaori has put both you and Sena on hold, correct? Good grief. What a mess she is. If I were in your shoes, I'd have punched her."

She also understood why Mai hadn't been eager to talk about it either. No matter how Mai explained it, she was sure to have aroused Satsuki's ire at Renako.

"No, it's all right," Mai said. "We talked, and I was the one who said I'd wait for her to answer." She shook her head silently. "And yet, it's… I don't know how to say this. It was the way she looked when Ajisai told her she liked her. I simply can't get it out of my mind."

"…You mean, the look on her face?"

"Mm-hmm." Mai smiled as she stared off into space. It was such a helpless smile, Satsuki thought, one you'd expect to see on any ordinary girl. "It was like she'd fallen in love at that very moment."

There must have been great emotion hiding behind those words, Satsuki knew. "Oh." It didn't matter at this point whether or not it was true. They had a bigger problem on their hands. *If it's to the point where even you are saying that,* Satsuki thought, *if even you're thinking that, then don't we already know how this'll turn out?*

Satsuki's chest ached. Wasn't this effectively the same thing as declaring defeat? She didn't understand why she felt so shaken, but she also didn't want to see Mai admit defeat this easily.

"What…do you want to do about it?" Satsuki asked.

"I don't know," said Mai.

What do you mean, you don't know? Satsuki thought. *You still haven't lost your last chance.* Mai was the kind of girl who'd get all confident and declare, "Don't worry, I'll change her mind." Yes, Mai did sometimes come over to Satsuki's house after a slipup at work or an argument with her mom to get it all off her chest. But once she was done venting, she would look relieved and say she was ready to face tomorrow head-on once more. Right? *It's just a crush,* Satsuki thought. A little thing like that couldn't stop Oduka Mai. Could it? Crushes were

like junk food that other kids in their class, the ones with nothing else to take up their time, got swept up in. But now that Mai had tasted love and could no longer stand tall without its luscious flavor, then maybe they had to resort to other options. If Satsuki said, “Forget about Amaori,” and kissed Mai here and now, would that make Mai happy? Would that make Satsuki feel less annoyed? *No, that’s not the issue,* she reminded herself, shooing that bizarre thought away. Friends didn’t kiss one another, and besides, Mai wouldn’t appreciate a kiss from Satsuki. What was the point in an exchange that was only a loss to them both?

Mai’s peachy pink lips parted slightly, and she looked away. “Right now, all I want is for Renako to be happy,” Mai said.

“What’re you talking about…?” said Satsuki. “When’d you become such a saint?”

Mai didn’t say anything, and Satsuki clicked her tongue automatically. There were so many things she wanted to say to Mai. *And* to Renako—and heck, throw in Ajisai too for good measure. But snapping at them all would merely make Satsuki feel better, and if she was going to do that, then Mai shouldn’t have come to her right from the start. Thus, her hands were tied. She couldn’t say anything.

She sat down beside Mai and laid a hand on her back. And then, with everything she had, she forced herself to say, “Are you actually going to be okay?”

“Yes.”

“Even if the two of them date without you?”

Mai didn’t answer. What she was suggesting was none other than making the person she loved happy by killing her feelings then and there and watching over her with a smiling, unemotional mask. It was an absurd idea for Mai to have, Satsuki thought. When Mai could get anything she wanted, how could she possibly choose this? *But you’ve always been that way, Mai,* Satsuki thought. *You’ve always been concerned solely with what other people want from you, you stupid, stupid little fool.*

For a time, Satsuki said nothing at all but rubbed Mai’s back. She had no idea what compelled her to do it, but she stayed there for a time all the same.

Chapter 5 Volume 4:
After the Amusement Park Date

IT WAS NOW the main event of the Makuhari Cosplay Summit, and Ajisai and Renako were on their way to the main stage where Mai awaited them.

But let's rewind slightly.

Mai walked down the hallway on break the Monday after the amusement park date but stopped when Ajisai called her name.

"Why, hello, Ajisai." Mai smiled like a child who'd been found in a game of hide-and-go-seek.

Mai's calm attitude stymied Ajisai momentarily before she took a step forward and said, "You see, I was hoping we could talk about yesterday."

A passing student waved as the two stood in place in the hall. Mai immediately snapped her natural smile on and waved back.

"Oh, but of course," she said. "I was thinking I needed to talk with you too, actually. I feel I've delayed in doing so."

Ajisai made a rather thoughtful expression, more so than Mai. "Why don't we find somewhere nice and quiet to talk? Like at the aquarium, for instance. It's just a bit, well, difficult to talk here at school."

"I know a place," Mai suggested.

She led Ajisai up past a deserted landing and out onto the roof. The wind gusted as she opened the metal door, and Ajisai's hair swayed in the breeze.

"Ooh, wow," Ajisai said. "I had no idea we were allowed up here."

Oddly enough, she felt elated as she took her first steps out onto the concrete in her indoor shoes. She wasn't far enough off the ground for it to make any real distance, yet the clear, blue sky above seemed so close she felt she could reach out and touch it.

Mai stood behind her and grinned. “Of course we aren’t,” she said. “That’s why this’ll be our secret.”

Ajisai giggled. “Okay. We’re being bad right now, huh?”

She wasted no time in reaching the edge of the roof. The fence was so low it barely went up to her waist, which hardly made for an efficient barrier. She could leap right over it, provided she got a proper run up.

“This is kind of spooky,” she said.

“Don’t get too close to the fence,” Mai said. She looked off into the distance and whispered to herself, “For I fear I won’t be able to fly anymore.”

Ajisai didn’t understand what that meant, but now that she considered the idea, she had to admit that Mai used to always appear so light and ethereal she really could float through the air. But now… maybe not.

“Come over here,” Mai said, beckoning Ajisai to stand next to her a short distance from the fence.

“Hey, Mai-chan?” Ajisai asked.

“Hmm?”

“You were planning on going to work the whole time, weren’t you?”

A cloud drifted across the serene blue sky above like it was drawn there with a paintbrush.

Ajisai continued, “Did you invite me and Rena-chan out on a date so we could be alone together?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Hmm… I just have a hunch.”

It was just that something had felt odd to her during that phone call before the date. Perhaps it was the fact that Mai sounded so calm, and even when she said she couldn’t make it, it was as if it was a pre-established fact. It made Ajisai wonder the entire time just why on earth Mai had done what she did, and there was only one conclusion to draw.

Mai smiled in self-deprecation. “I’d…prefer not to answer,” she said, cutting herself short.

The stubborn, un-Mai-ish refusal startled Ajisai. “Mai-chan,” she said.

“I’d prefer not to lie to you whenever possible, Ajisai. You’re one of the precious few people here at school who wants to treat me like an equal.”

“But Mai, that’s how I feel too.”

She gently rested her hand on Mai’s arm. It was slender, unmistakably the arm of a teenage girl. The old Ajisai would have given up after someone had turned her down once already. But now she had the strength to press the issue, thanks to Mai herself.

“I’m here where I am now because of the encouragement you gave me,” Ajisai went on. “I’m incredibly grateful to you for that. So come on, Mai-chan. Can’t you tell me why you left the both of us alone together?”

However, Mai still did not answer.

Ajisai put a hand to her chest and looked down. She knew it was cheating, but she said, “You know, um. I kissed Rena-chan.”

She gestured like she was digging her nails into the tender inner part of Mai’s heart.

“It was exciting,” Ajisai said. “Really, really exciting. Rena-chan and I held hands all the way home. Hey, Mai-chan, I know you told me not to worry, but…” She looked up to see the expression on Mai’s face. “If this keeps going the way it has, don’t you think I’m going to win?”

It was Mai’s loss by default.

“Rena-chan will end up with me,” Ajisai said. “And…are you okay with that?”

No. How could she be? And yet, Mai said, “I suppose, as long as Renako is happy.”

“Mai-chan!” Ajisai cried. She gripped Mai’s hand, and Mai made no move to resist her. “How can you say that? Oh, I knew this was all my fault. I should never have asked her ou—”

“No, Ajisai. You’ve done nothing wrong. I’m the one to blame for everything.”

That gave Ajisai pause. “You think you’re the one to blame?”

Mai looked down and forced out through gritted teeth, “Yes. I’ve

been thinking for quite a while now that I'm the one to blame. I always used to do only what worked for me. I always thought it was fine for me to carry on as I did. I was immature, but unfortunately, the world is a bit more complicated than the way I pictured it."

Ajisai gathered that Mai was embarking into discussing something much, much deeper than the issue of the date. She looked at Mai's beautiful features so as not to misread any of her feelings. "Tell me about it," she said.

"I don't have a sense of self," said Mai. "In every moment of my life, I'm only acting as this Oduka Mai character my mother wants me to be: a young lady worthy of being the star model of Queen Rose. She's strong, sensible, and adored by all her schoolmates. Even I think she sounds wonderful." Mai sounded like she was recounting the accomplishments of a stranger. "I can do anything right so long as I am Oduka Mai. I can be a good person, even. But Ajisai, you need to know that it was Oduka Mai who encouraged you to ask Renako out. The *real* me couldn't say that to you."

"But…" Ajisai said. She shook her head slightly. "No matter which one you are, you're still Mai-chan to me. I mean, we all know I'm not a good kid all the time either. I have my sneaky and selfish moments too. And if I can recognize that in myself, then I know you can too."

Mai laid a hand on her chest. "I've fallen in love for the first time in my life. I've been drunk on the excitement, the passion that burned in me. Everything about Renako captivates me. I had such a delightful time losing myself in these strong impulses, and I thought that was what it meant to be free. However…"

Mai dropped her gaze. "In doing so, I hurt her."

"Mai-chan…" said Ajisai.

"I know. I know Renako doesn't want to be loved the way I love her. It doesn't matter how long I wait. I know she'll never fall in love with me the way I am."

"That's not true!"

"And that's why I've decided that the least I can do is be as kind as possible, in both Satsuki's situation and your situation. But you see, then I don't know how I can close the gap with someone else later. After all, Oduka Mai belongs to everyone, and she would never go and choose a single person over everyone else."

The cold, heavy weight of Mai's statement felt like a massive wall of water. Everyone wore different masks depending on the situation, even Ajisai. The girl she was at home, the one she was at school, and the one she was with Renako were three very different girls indeed. Even the various Ajisai masks she wore around each of her friends had their slight differences. It was only natural, really. However, Mai's mask was all *too* thick, to the extent that it could almost be called a curse. Or destiny.

"But all the same," Mai said, "I do have feelings for Renako. I really and truly do not want to give up on her. Nevertheless…" She took a deep breath.

"I'm frightened that she might hate me."

***

It didn't matter if other people thought poorly of her. And if they resented her? Well, it was Mai's motto in life that there wasn't anything she could do about that. However, she still did not want *Renako or the rest of her friends* to hate her.

"I don't know what to do anymore," Mai admitted, head hung low.

For a while, Ajisai found herself at a loss for words. There had to be so much backstory here, so many things about Mai's successful modeling career that Ajisai couldn't imagine. Mai must have had no choice but to carry on living her life even as she hurt people. Ajisai couldn't just give her a lighthearted, "Aw, c'mon, it'll be all right."

But she wanted to do something, so she pulled her into a gentle hug. "Mai-chan…"

Still looking down at the ground, Mai murmured, "Why are you crying, Ajisai?"

"I'm sorry," Ajisai said. "It's because I'm just not that strong, not like you."

"Nonsense. It's your kindness, I'm sure. I've never understood how you do it." Mai hugged Ajisai back. "If you can make Renako happy,

Ajisai…then I won't stand in your way any longer."

"No, Mai. No! You can't give up on your love like that. I'll never allow it." Ajisai pushed Mai away gently and glared at her through teary eyes. "If you do, I promise I'll hate you."

Mai lowered her gaze, forlorn. "That would be…not ideal, certainly."

Ajisai shook her head, taking back what she had just said. "No, never mind. I couldn't hate you. I like you, Mai, and I always will. I'll like you forever, so don't make me hate you."

She gently extended her hand, and Mai took it as if to make up. Ajisai wiped the corners of her eyes with her handkerchief and glanced at Mai. She looked like a kindergartner who'd waited forever for a parent who never came to pick her up.

Ajisai forced herself to smile. "Hey, Mai-chan? You should come with me on my next date."

"…Do you really mean that?" Mai asked.

"Yeah. Next time, we won't invite Renako. It'll be just us. We have lots to talk about, and I want to do something for you after all you've done for me. Let me rephrase that, actually—*let me* do what I can for you."

"…I feel rather apologetic that you're to the point of saying these things."

"Well, now you're another person who knows how stubborn and selfish I can be." Ajisai stuck out her tongue slightly and grinned. This teasing gesture was a valiant attempt to lighten the mood, but Mai looked as solemn as ever. Still, Ajisai felt glad. The fact that Mai had been honest with her led her to believe that there was still something she could do about it.

"All right, Ajisai. Could you give me a moment?"

"Of course." Ajisai nodded.

Mai let go of her hand and pulled out her phone. She frowned as she looked over her schedule. "I don't think I'll be free for the foreseeable future. I'm afraid it won't work out."

"Oh… You really are booked solid, Mai-chan."

But it'd be tough on Ajisai to wait another month or two with

these same feelings. As easy as it would have been to shrug her shoulders and give up, Ajisai decided to be selfish one more time. “So how about if I wait until after you’re done with work for the day?” she asked. “Like that time over summer vacation.”

“I’d feel bad for making you wait,” Mai said.

“Well, if you don’t want to leave me hanging…then you’d better hurry up and come hang out as soon as you can, right?” Ajisai felt like a bossy girlfriend saying that. It surprised her to find that she could even say such a thing.

“Well then, let me see,” said Mai. “Oh, I have a job this weekend where all I need to do is make a stage performance in the afternoon. I should be free before or after that, so long as you don’t mind waiting at the venue for me for a bit.”

“That’s no problem. I like watching your performances anyway.” Ajisai made an okay gesture with her hand and grinned.

“Do you really? Well, then that sounds like a plan.”

Ajisai beamed. “You bet.”

However, somewhere deep down, she couldn’t help but recognize the oddity of this behavior. If Mai gave up on Renako, that left Renako free for Ajisai to date, and yet… She’d asked Renako out to pursue her own happiness, not on some idle whim, and yet… In the end, she didn’t want to be selfish. She wanted to make other people happy and have her own happiness at the same time. She was just being picky about how she acquired it.

As Ajisai went back inside with Mai and closed the door behind her, she thought to herself, *Maybe I’m more selfish than I first thought… Maybe.* Or maybe she was only copying Mai, the very same girl who’d helped her. Well, if that’s all it was, then Ajisai could live with that. After all, there’d never been anyone more beautiful and gallant than Mai had been in that moment.

***

When Ajisai arrived at the convention center, she found Mai waiting for her with a bow. “I’m so sorry to even ask,” Mai said.

“I mean, I don’t mind, but…are you sure?”

Not once had Ajisai ever thought she’d get to experience the “We need you to join our performance” trope in real life.

It wasn’t a complex scenario either. It turned out that the model who was supposed to work with Mai in the event had caught a cold, and while normally Mai would have been able to handle the entire show alone, this time Mai was to wear one half of a pair of costumes. Thus, apparently, she needed an extra person. Therefore, when Ajisai happened to show up, one of the administrators took one look at her and said, “Oh, is this your friend, Oduka-san? She’ll do!” And now Ajisai was cosplaying for the first time in her life.

“But this is embarrassing,” Ajisai whined. “I’m not pretty like you.”

Mai chuckled. “You look wonderful, Ajisai. You’re really quite adorable.”

“Yeah, but are you *sure* sure?” Ajisai hit her with the pleading puppy-dog eyes as Mai beamed away. “And I never expected your work to involve this kind of thing.”

“It’s a bit of a coincidence. Queen Rose is a convention sponsor, you see, and thus they invited me. I’m afraid I don’t know much about anime, but I studied all the paperwork they gave me and reviewed the source material. I don’t want to disrespect the fans with my performance.”

Ajisai clapped her hands and oohed. Yup, Mai was about as cool as it got whenever she was on the job. “I’d better study up last minute too.”

“Are you sure? I hate to ask, since you’re already doing me a big favor.”

“Nah, don’t mention it. It’s better than nothing, right?”

Mai and Ajisai were currently in the dressing room, albeit hardly alone due to all the convention staff bustling about them. Still, as they huddled together staring at the tiny phone screens in their hands, something about them did suggest they were off in their own little world.

As the excitement from the crowd outside reached them in a low rumble, Mai remarked offhand, “You’re such a good kid, Ajisai.”

“Where did that come from? Stop, you’ll make me blush.”

Ajisai shot her a glance. Mai looked even more surreally gorgeous than normal, likely due to the effect of the stage makeup. Ajisai’s heart skipped a beat. She took that feeling and converted it to a casual comment of, “Jeez. You’ve been feeding me compliments nonstop for a while now. If you’re not careful, I’ll start falling for you.”

“Good. I like you, you know.”

“Oh my god, that’s exactly what I mean,” Ajisai grumbled. She hadn’t meant to say that, but now here she was being such an attention-craving tease. It was all Mai’s fault.

“I had a thought,” Mai said. “If Renako weren’t here and you had asked me out instead, I wonder whether or not I would have said yes.”

“Huh? Wait, what’s this all about?” This was a ridiculous idea, but given what it was, Ajisai felt intrigued at where Mai was taking it.

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing,” said Mai. “Depending on the timing, there is every possibility I would have said yes. But kissing you would be another story altogether, I suppose.”

“Whoa. Me kissing you?”

Ajisai stared at Mai’s lips for too long before scrambling to look down at her phone again. She put her hands together in her lap. “Wh-what are you even talking about?” she asked. “Jeez, I feel like I just got turned down even though I didn’t ask you out in the first place.”

Mai laughed. “My apologies. But it’s interesting, don’t you agree? How come Renako is the only exception? And really, what in the world does it mean to like or to love anyway?”

Mai did not look down at her phone but instead stared off into space like she was picturing Renako. Ajisai gave her a small nod. She understood how Mai felt, which meant she didn’t have any idea of the answer either.

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s a good question. What is love, anyway? How come it’s so different in different people?”

Mai’s lips moved. “Renafits.” Friends with Renafits—that was the name for Mai and Renako’s special relationship, or so Ajisai had been told earlier.

“Perhaps Renako likes me in the same sort of way I like you,” Mai

said. “If that’s true, I really have treated her horribly.”

“Oh, Mai-chan,” Ajisai said.

“You know, I’ve been rather frightened of showing myself before my supporters these days.” Mai raised one hand and held it up with the other. “My body exists for Queen Rose’s sake, you see. If it were to be mixed with impurities, what would the people who’ve watched me all this time think? Now that I’ve fallen for Renako, I’m concerned that my emotions might leak out all over the place.”

“Feelings aren’t impurities, Mai,” Ajisai chided. Crushes weren’t necessarily a bad thing, when it came to work. After all, Mai looked so cute when she was head over heels that it made Ajisai’s heart ache, and she was a girl too, even. “It’ll be okay. We all love you, Mai. Besides, models aren’t like idols, so you’re allowed to date, right?”

“That is true. But you’ll all be disappointed if I fail to perform as well as I used to as a result.”

“Well, then that just means you have to try your best to make sure it doesn’t happe—”

Then it hit her. Ajisai grabbed Mai’s hand. “And that’s no reason to give up on Renako, now, is it?”

“You’re right. Thank you, Ajisai… Oh, I hate this.” Mai hugged herself. “I hate that I’m so weak you need to comfort me like this. I hate that I’m not strong enough to stand tall onstage. The thought of not being able to live up to all your expectations is unbearable. I’ve just never felt this way before.”

She gritted her back teeth, her expression grim. It was the first time Ajisai had ever seen her like this, and it was almost hard to believe that Oduka Mai, the one and only, could look this distraught.

“Ever since I fell for Renako,” Mai said, “I’ve learned so many bad things about myself. Love has taught me how fearful, cowardly, and spineless I am. I had no idea it was powerful enough to destroy my heart. I always used to think I could be calm and collected no matter what happened to me.”

But no matter how much pain she was in, she had to put a smile on her face and go perform. The sheer thought of that made Ajisai’s heart ache.

“Hey, Mai-chan,” she said. “Do you mind if I step out for a breath

of fresh air or som—”

She was only halfway through her sentence when Mai leaped forward and pulled her into a hug. Naturally, this startled Ajisai. “Wh-whoa,” she spluttered. “Careful, Mai-chan, your makeup’s rubbing off.”

“I suppose they’re right. You really do fall for those who are kind to you when you’re at your lowest,” Mai said. “I know I keep repeating this, but thank you, Ajisai. I’m so glad to have you as a friend.”

Her chin was still trembling, but Mai ended the quick hug by grabbing Ajisai’s shoulders and pushing her away. “Would you leave me alone for a bit?” she asked. “It’ll be fine. I’ll be back to normal by the time I go on, and you can join me onstage later.”

“But Mai-chan,” Ajisai protested.

“There’s no need to worry. I’m a professional.”

Mai smiled, but Ajisai knew she was faking it. Still, there wasn’t anything she could do. Mai had once told her a very important thing: before anything else, she was just an ordinary girl. She wanted to say the same for Mai, but she couldn’t bring herself to do so no matter how much she tried. She knew that if she did, Mai would only give her a sad smile for her troubles.

Oh god, Ajisai bemoaned. *This is all because I worked up my courage.* She rose from her seat and put her hand on her heart. Yes, she had fallen for Renako, but Mai was a one-of-a-kind friend. She loved them both, and friends meant something special to Ajisai. *I want them to only experience the fun bits,* she thought. *I don’t want them to have to feel sadness or pain. I want to be the sole bearer of all that responsibility.*

She put her hand on the dressing room doorknob and turned to look back over her shoulder. Mai looked tiny from behind, like she’d sunk to the bottom of a murky black lake. *I’m sorry, God,* Ajisai prayed. *I won’t ever ask for my own happiness again. So, hey, please?*

She tried with all her might to fight back the tears welling up in her eyes. Right now, she wasn’t the one who could make Mai happy, and there was only one person who could.

Please, she thought again. *Please, I really care for Mai so much, so could you make her happy? Please, Rena-chan?*

Then she bumped into Satsuki while walking around the

convention center, and then…she walked to the stage where Mai awaited.

She pulled Renako along with her by the hand.

Please, she thought.

Chapter 6:
There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless…

THOUGHTS RAN THROUGH my head as we walked up to the stage.

If there really was a way for no one to ever hate you or think bad things about you, then there must be just the one: to be typical. That was, to have the same likes and dislikes as everyone else. If you were exactly the same as all the rest, no one would give you hate. You'd have a perfect, invincible barrier.

I wanted to be the same as everyone else. I wanted to match up perfectly with them and be typical—an upright citizen, a cookie-cutter copy of a teenage girl. That's why I never openly talked about my love of games, because we all know teen girls being hooked on FPSes is atypical. I looked up what sort of things typical girls were into and did my darndest to like them too. I paid an absolutely wild amount of attention every day to making sure I stuck to social norms. I mean, considering this is me we're talking about, things didn't always go so hot…but hey, I tried.

To me, being called a typical girl you could find anywhere was the highest form of praise. I didn't need to be the most popular girl in school—I just wanted to be so typical that no one thought badly of me.

When I went up to Mai and started talking to her on the first day of school, she fit into the category of "special" girl—that was, a rank above typical. Special people had exceptional talents, a kind of flair that made it so no one disliked them. Or, on the flip side, maybe it's just that they don't care when people dislike them. Being special meant being so dazzling that everyone who hated you was the miserable wretch, not the other way round. Being special made you number one. Or, maybe, the *only* one.

I had a great time in high school as a totally typical girl and one of Mai's followers—or, well, that was the plan. But I miscalculated, and that's why I fled to the rooftop on that sunny June day. I couldn't make myself typical. If normal's a rank below special, what do you call

someone who can't even hack it at that? A loser. Duh.

However, even when Mai saw me for who I really was, she thought I was special. And we started a secret relationship for only the two of us. It made me feel good. It made me feel *rewarded* that she treated me like someone special, even though I hadn't made any growth of my own. Even though I was really just a failure who couldn't even manage to hit the "typical" mark.

With all my might, I used the word "best friend" like a shield to hide my own unsightly self. I mean, two girls dating? That's atypical. Your girlfriend being a superstar? Atypical. Someone *that* incredible chasing after me? Atypical. Impossibly atypical.

As I drowned, I clung to that straw called "typical" that I couldn't let go of. I was too weak to swim on my own.

Everyone in Mai's friend group was special. They all had an inner glamour, unlike me, and had their sights set on bigger things. Satsuki-san, Ajisai-san, and Kaho-chan were all amazing. I was the only one, I was positive, who was afraid of other people hating me. I always felt wretched as I carried on making that servile smile.

But what if I could go back and do it all over again? What if I could be like those optimistic girls I idolized, the ones I stared at on my phone screen that day in my dark bedroom? What if I could reach for the light like they did? What if I'd always been allowed to try? What if, from this day forward, I tried to become a new me?

Okay. Then that meant now…

That meant now I had to talk to Mai.

I slowly stepped up onto the stage. *I'm on my way, Mai,* I told myself.

This stage is my *stage.*

***

I called Mai's name as we came up onstage from around the back. The spotlight was so piercing, I felt like it was skewering me. Now that I was up on the main stage, the audience seemed bigger than ever.

We three cosplayers stood in a line, with Mai first, then me, and then Ajisai-san. It felt like I was taking the center, lead role, even as ridiculous as that was.

"Let me introduce you," Mai said. "These are my lovely friends Ajisai and Renako."

The crowd gave us a huge round of applause. Hearing it from up on stage produced such a tremor that I felt like the whole ground was shaking. Honestly, it really freaked me out. But I somehow managed to look a lot calmer than I thought I'd be, probably because there was absolutely nothing going on upstairs right now (definitely not anything to brag about). In this moment, I had eyes only for Mai.

"And without further ado, let's kick off our first segment," Mai said. "I have a few questions for our special guests, but before we dive in, is there anything they'd like to ask me?"

What Mai was saying sort of went in one ear and out another, but I spoke up anyway. "Hey, how come you didn't go to the amusement park?"

Mai paused halfway through trying to pass the mic to me. She looked confused for a few moments and then said, not into the mic, "Didn't I tell you? I was called into work last minute."

"Was that because of how I responded to Ajisai-san asking me out?"

"Is this a second question already?" Mai said. "Slow down."

"But I told you, right?" I continued. "I didn't mean it like that. So how come you went and made that decision on your own?"

The audience muttered. I doubted they could actually hear me all that well, and they were all probably starting to wonder if this was some sort of show.

But I kept on talking. "I told you I was giving it serious thought. Sure, I probably made you really anxious in the process, but I mean…"

"Oh, I wasn't anxious at all," Mai said. "Oduka Mai doesn't feel anxiety, now does she?" She gave me a detached grin.

Behind me, Ajisai-san piped up. “Yeah, Rena-chan. This is your fault too.”

“Huh?” I said.

“Mai-chan’s been super, super anxious,” she said. “She’s been thinking tons of horrible things. She’s a worrier, you know.”

“Oh. Really?” A spasm of pain shot through my chest. Ajisai-san was right, and I should have known that I had hurt Mai quite badly. All along, I’d only been focused on me, me, me.

Mai still smiled away, but her eyes gradually grew more serious. “Ajisai, I don’t believe this is the right place to talk about such things. I am on the job right now, you know. Let’s have this discussion another time.”

She was right. We were most certainly live onstage right now, and Mai needed to make this event a success. It would have been unreasonable of me to ask for a few extra minutes of her time, surely. But, for some reason, I had a flash of intuition that if I backed down now, Mai and I would never be able to talk about this again. I felt torn.

Just then, someone yelled from the audience, “Oh no! There’s a microphone malfunction! Oduka Mai-san’s asking for our patience!”

The shout was so loud it echoed around the auditorium and startled me. And what was even more startling was that the person who yelled that was none other than Satsuki-san. Uh, hello? What was she doing?

Not surprisingly, the composure on Mai’s face broke. “Satsuki…” she said. Her eyebrows knitted themselves together.

Then Kaho-chan joined in too by screaming at the top of her lungs, “Uh-huh, that’s right!” before dissolving into a coughing fit.

Satsuki-san and I locked eyes. Hers seemed to say to me, *I’ve done what I can, so now go and do whatever works for you.* I clenched my fists.

Mai looked almost as if she was being driven into a corner. She mumbled, “Why is this happening to me?”

“Mai-chan,” Ajisai-san said. “We all want you to be happy. And I don’t just mean us, your friends. I mean every fan of yours in this room right now too. That’s why I want you to understand.”

Mai shook her head like she was refusing what Ajisai-san had just

said. “This isn’t any of your business. I never expected you to take your meddling this far, Ajisai.”

“You can say whatever you want, but I don’t want you running away, Mai-chan.”

“I would never run.”

I took a step closer to Mai. “Hey,” I said. “Would you be okay if I went out with Ajisai-san?”

For an instant, Mai’s face twisted in a grimace. My question was like a definitive ravine.

“Well…” she said. “Yes. Of course. Ajisai is a far more kind and lovely young woman than I. I’m sure you’ll be quite happy with her. Yes, it’s right and fair that you both date.”

“Mai-chan!” Ajisai-san cried. She tried to rush up to Mai, but I put my arm out and stopped her. I gently closed my eyes.

God. My heart was pounding like mad.

Dating someone meant you were making their life your responsibility. The thing was, I always thought it wouldn’t be right for me to take up even a precious minute or second of Mai or Ajisai-san’s time. I didn’t deserve it, not when I kept running away. I was no match for either of them and their heartbreaking kindness. And if I turned them down, what’s the worst that could happen? They’d just be sad for a bit, right? It was simple, really. What could I possibly do for either of them? Well, the answer to that was: *try to be someone they deserve.* Yeah, I mean me. I had to try. And asking someone out is the ritual that marks that decision.

“Ajisai-san,” I said, “I really like you too. That actually sunk in when you asked me out. I know you’re too good for me, but…Ajisai-san, I love every moment we spend together, and my heart beats so fast whenever we talk.”

For some odd reason, Ajisai-san covered her mouth and frowned sadly. “Oh! Does that mean…?”

“Yeah,” I said.

I took a deep breath.

Remember the time when I took Mai by the hand and jumped into the pool with her? It’d felt like I’d mustered up a fair bit of my life’s

supply of courage in order to make it happen. I might have used up a whole three years' worth of Amaori Renako courage in that moment, even. And you know what? That just meant I now had to use up every last scrap of courage in my entire life right here and now.

I looked straight into Mai's eyes and gave her my answer to that summer day.

"I want to go out with Ajisai-san."

There it was: all of my courage.

Ajisai-san whispered in a tiny little voice, "How come?"

But Mai looked almost relieved. "Oh," she said. "All right."

They were like complete opposites, light and dark. But, like in a bad collage, their facial expressions were mismatched.

"I'm glad to hear that," Mai went on. "That means that I can still be Oduka Mai."

"Oh, Rena-chan, how come?" Ajisai-san asked. She clung to my arm.

It's because you're so kind, Ajisai-san, I thought. *And what you're doing right now is Exhibit A.* Her feelings of distress over Mai being hurt won out over her own personal relief. And it was because Ajisai-san was this kind of person that my time in high school was so fun. However, I could also say the same for Mai.

I looked at her as she smiled. She always did her very best for me. She illuminated me like the sun itself, but I was always ungrateful, forever focusing on the dark shadows attached to my heels.

The thing was, I really, really liked them both. So that's why I, well…

That's why I said, "And Mai, I want to go out with you too!"

Because to *hell* with being typical!

"…I beg your pardon?" said Mai.

"Huh?" said Ajisai.

Ow. The silence that followed pricked my skin like a needle. I really didn't want to see them both making those awful expressions. And now I'd used up my entire life's worth of courage in that one sentence. What's gone was gone. However, I was aware that if I went, "Okay, see you!", booked it out of the convention center, and flung myself off the school roof, I'd just make headlines in tomorrow's news, so I had to keep talking. Man. We'd all have been better off if we didn't have mouths.

"I'll date Ajisai-san *and* Mai!" I repeated, creating a net-zero gain of any new information. I felt like someone had written the words "Absolute Trash" in thick, permanent marker across my face. Maybe I was only hearing things, but I could have sworn I heard a serious Satsuki-san mutter of "Disgusting" from the audience. I was boxed in on all sides and had no idea what to do.

Okay. No. I still had a mouth. It was time to bring back the most primal wisdom of mankind: language.

"Ajisai-san, I like you," I said. "As I've said before, I've liked you for a really, really long time. I didn't used to think it was romantic, but when I look back on it, I think it has been that way right from the start. I mean, my heart skips a beat every time I look at you and everything. So Ajisai-san, I've really fallen for you!"

"O-oh, okay." Ajisai-san looked confused, like what I was saying wasn't really sinking in. I guess that only stood to reason, and it was better than her looking repulsed. Well. She might have been a little repulsed anyway.

"And Mai, I like you too. I think I've been falling for you ever since that time you saved me on the roof. And I really didn't mind all that much when you tried to get it on with me. I'm sorry for being so stubborn about it. Mai, I've also really fallen for you!"

"O-oh…" Mai nodded as if the sheer force of my words was compelling her. Seeing Oduka Mai, of all people, lost for words like this was a rare and precious thing indeed. Once again, I was reminded of the power of language and how it had sparked many wars across human history.

Wait, wait, wait. I wasn't giving up yet!

“Typically, this is the time when I’d pick one of you, and I think I’d have to tell the other one sorry. And, to be honest, that’s what I was planning on doing too. It’s just, well, I really don’t want to tell you I’ll date Ajisai-san, Mai, not when it seems like you’re already expecting me to turn you down.”

“What are you saying?” Mai asked.

“And Ajisai-san, it’s the same for you!” I continued unabated. “You’re so kind that you’re more worried about Mai getting turned down rather than me picking you, right? And if I’m wrong, I’m sorry. I don’t know anything about you, so it’s just. Well. If I’m right about this, you should tell me!”

“I suppose…” Ajisai-san tapped her lips and looked away. I was relieved she didn’t say anything like, “Hey, you know what? (insert giggle here) I kinda lost interest in you while I was waiting, so it’s whatever.” Well, not totally relieved, but you get what I mean.

“So to hell with what’s typical,” I said. I placed a hand on my chest and declared, “I don’t *need* to be typical. And I’m not choosing between you two. I choose both. Yeah, I know this is asking for a lot. But Mai, Ajisai-san, I want to go out with *both* of you.”

They looked at each other as if they wanted to ask one another what it was they should do.

“Mai-chan…” Ajisai-san said.

“Ajisai…” said Mai.

Wait, how come they weren’t all excited, like, *Woo-hoo! We’re all in this together?!*

Ajisai-san looked at me so intensely it almost felt hard to breathe. “Hey, Rena-chan,” she said, “I understand that you’re being considerate for me, and I am grateful for that. But you really shouldn’t prioritize my feelings over—”

“Hold on, Ajisai.” Mai grabbed Ajisai-san’s wrist and interrupted her. “I refuse to let you go on. You deserve to be happy.”

“Mai-chan…”

They both looked at each other.

“Guys! You’re missing the point!” I said, rudely butting in. “Did none of that sink in? That’s not what I want. I want to date *both* of you.

This has nothing to do with what you guys feel. I want to, I'm *dying* to hold both your hands!"

I took Mai's hand, and then Ajisai-san's, and held both of them tight. Having both of their overwhelmingly beautiful faces right before me gave me the involuntary urge to apologize. I was no match for either of them, and that thought almost made me let go of their hands. But if I had, I would have just been repeating all the behavior that had led me up to this point. I needed to show my readiness to go through with this, not spout some nonsense that'd put us all back at square one. I needed them to believe in me.

"Uh, just as a thought experiment… If I dated Mai and not you, Ajisai-san, what would you do?" I asked.

"Huh? O-oh, um," she said. She looked away. "I guess I'd. Well. Support you both." She was starting to tear up!

"No! That's not what I want! Ajisai-san, I want us to go on another date and everything!"

"Another date?" she repeated. "Y-you mean, even with the thing on the, um. The Ferris wheel?"

Ajisai-san flushed red, and I nodded. Just then, I felt a line of sweat trickle down my back as I realized what I'd blurted out. That was tantamount to saying I wanted to kiss her again. Well! If it came down to that, I guess I. Hm. It. Well. That certainly was a Thing!

"And what about you, Mai?!" I cried. "What would you do if I dated Ajisai-san and not you?"

"I'd move to France and pray for your happiness from far, far away."

"What the heck? That's literally awful! Wait a second, is that really what you were thinking of doing? See, even Ajisai-san is taken aback!"

"…Mai-chan?" Ajisai-san asked.

Mai didn't sound like she was joking at all. She nodded slightly and said, "If I were around, I'm sure I'd only cause you to worry, Ajisai. I don't know if I'd ever sway Renako back to me, but I think it'd be best for both of us in that scenario if I kept my distance."

"God, that is the most Mai reasoning ever," I said. "I hate it. Mai, I don't want you to go!" I squeezed her hand like I was trying to fix our

connection in place. “Because I like you, Mai.”

“But you have Ajisa—”

“Yeah, and I like Ajisai-san too!” I snapped back, fully defiant. “You’re both way too nice, so you’re both trying to back off. Quit it. Look, it turns out that I *hundred percent* swing that way, and you know what? I’m doing the best I can for myself, so all I want is my own happiness. And if I can’t date both of you, I’m going to be miserable!”

“Rena-chan…what are you even saying?” Ajisai-san broke out into a broad grin as she watched me and my all-too frantic raving. “Isn’t this two-timing?”

“…I mean, yeah.” I nodded meekly. Societally speaking, I guess you could call what I was doing two-timing, and, generally speaking, that’s considered just about the worst thing a person could do. I’d even heard of two-timers getting stabbed before, which was a freaky thought.

Ajisai-san patted herself on the chest like she was trying to soothe her pounding heart. “I mean, it comes as a bit of a shock that my first ever dating experience will start off with me being two-timed.”

“I mean, yeah… But life’s long, and these things happen, I guess…”

Oh, crap. I felt like the stuff that was coming out of my mouth was getting more outrageous the more I blabbered on. Cheat on Ajisai-san? Anyone who dared do that would be best off chucking themselves into a black hole, I figured. *But don’t lose heart, heart. Don’t lose your mind, mind.* No matter how much my conscience caught up with me, I had to remember the warmth of their hands in mine.

“But I mean,” I said, “Mai used to tell me this nonstop, and I never once believed her. Before we met, I thought girls dating one another was plenty atypical. But she forced me to change my mind.”

“Did I?” Mai asked. She sounded surprised, like this was the first time she’d ever heard this. *Hey now.*

“So that’s why I’m thinking, why do we have to be tied down to what’s typical? Why can’t I date more than one person? This time, I want you guys to do what I did. I want you to change to match me.”

Both Mai and Ajisai-san fell silent after that overly selfish bit of logic. Well…okay. Yeah, I guess that was a weird thing to suggest. They’d both asked me out, so I was supposed to be the one making the

choice here. So how come I'd flipped the script? It was like I was clinging to both of them and howling, "Wait! Don't abandon me!"

Then Ajisai-san was the one to break the silence. "Hey," she said, turning to Mai with a look of confusion. "What do you think, Mai-chan…? Since she's offering, do you think we should both date?"

"You and I? Well, that's certainly an idea."

"Wait! Don't abandon me!" I howled, clinging to both of them. If they went and left me alone, I didn't think I'd survive. "I'll make you happy. I swear, I'll make you both so happy!"

Then I knelt on the ground and took both their hands in mine. There wasn't a single trace of the conceited girl who had lectured her mirror image in Kaho-chan. At the moment, I was more like a majorly philandering knight.

"Just give me three years!" I said. "Please go out with me until we graduate high school. I know you'll be so glad you did by the time it's over. I'll make you both fall head over heels for me, just you wait and see!" I was practically shouting at this point. "I swear I won't be like, 'Oh god, why me?' any longer. I won't doubt the fact that you guys like me, and I'm going to do everything I can to make it so you'll like me back forever. I'll be the kind of girlfriend you deserve, just you wait! So… So…"

Suddenly, I was sobbing, and the words wouldn't come out any longer. That's because I had no actual basis for anything I was saying. I really did like them, and I also legit did want to date both of them. But whether or not I could make them happy was up to me. There was no guarantee; I couldn't promise anything. It was too self-serving for me to ask them to believe in what I said.

But all the same, I wanted them to believe. I wanted them both to have faith in me. I felt that, if they did, then we could make this work.

"Please, Mai and Ajisai-san. Go out with me. I'll make you so happy. After all, I really, really like both of you."

This was the worst way to ask anyone out ever. I sounded like a toddler throwing a tantrum. But I'd bared everything to the world, and what was done was done. I'd shown them the world in which we…well, I, at least, could be as happy as could be. This was the shape that my love took, as atypical as it was.

And now, the ball was in their court.

“I’m sorry for being so mean to you just now,” Ajisai-san said. She cradled my head as if to hide my crying.

“No, don’t be,” I said. “It makes total sense. I mean, my suggestion was really wack.”

“I think I’m still pretty baffled,” she admitted, “because I can’t picture how this’ll work at all. Plus, I also have some concerns that this may not actually make all of us happy. I think we might run into more hardships and upsets than we’ve had already.”

“Yeah…” I said.

We stood there up on that stage with everyone watching us in that world of light. Then Ajisai-san spoke up. “But you know,” she said, “I’m the one who took that first step and tried something new even when I didn’t know how it would work out in the end. In spite of that, you worked up your courage to suggest this, and I don’t want to say no without giving you a chance first.”

I looked up at Ajisai-san, and she gave me a gentle smile. “It’s just like you said. You wanted all three of us to keep hanging out forever, remember?”

Yeah, now that she mentioned it, I did recall saying that. It had been too much fun spending summer vacation as a group, and Ajisai-san remembered that too.

“I’m selfish,” she said, “and I have a hair-trigger temper. But all the same, because I really like you…” Her voice was like a warm rain.

“Ajisai-san…?” I said. I held my breath.

“Well, it’s just until we graduate, you know?” She giggled. “Okay. Let’s do our best to make this work out.”

“Oh. Wait. So does that mean…?” I slowly stood up and looked into Ajisai-san’s eyes. She readjusted our joined hands, enmeshing her fingers with mine like we were a couple.

And then Ajisai-san—one of the most popular girls in the class, the girl I’d admired for so long—looked bashful and said, “Let’s go on another date soon. Okay?”

Then, at that very moment, Ajisai-san became my girlfriend.

I felt so dizzy I almost fainted. Or I felt like I wanted to run

around the stage in circles. “Thank you, Ajisai-san,” I cried. “Thank you!”

I threw myself at her in a hug, and Ajisai-san made a cute squeaking noise. Oops, I shouldn’t mess up her costume. I stepped back politely. There was no need to rush. I’d have plenty of opportunities to do this sort of thing later, although I wasn’t entirely sure what “this sort of thing” constituted.

Anyway, we weren’t done yet! I still had one more person who’d asked me out, and I needed to get her answer too. I wiped away my tears and turned to look back at Mai.

“Mai,” I said. She looked lost and out of place, even though she was far more at home onstage than anyone else. God. We really did have a lot—and I meant *a lot*—to talk about.

“I’m sorry that I kept you waiting,” I said. “And I’m sorry that I keep using you to show off. I haven’t had any confidence or courage, but you know what? I’ve decided that I want to change. I really want to. And I think that if I’m with you, I can move forward.”

Mai looked so miserable that it felt like she’d crumble away to dust if you touched her. I reached out to her with my finger. This had all started with that contest of ours to see if we would be better off as friends or lovers, and now we were finally reaching the conclusion.

“Do you recall the time you grabbed me and we leaped into the pool?” Mai asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I took that to mean that, even if I am no longer able to fly, you’ll still let me share my sorrows with you.”

“That’s right.”

Yeah. I’d wanted to tell her that no matter how much she messed up, I’d be there to comfort her. Because that’s what you do for the ones you love. You share the good times and the bad both.

“It made me so glad to hear that,” Mai said. “I fell even deeper in love with you from that day on. However…if you were to date Ajisai and me both, like you suggested…” Mai began to tear up. “I fear that it would prove very difficult for you. As kind as you are, you would have to shoulder the burden of two people’s worth of trouble, and this current incident made me realize that I produce quite my fair share of

trouble on my own. How would you handle that?"

How *would* I handle that? What would I do when the time came for me to take on two people's share of unhappiness? Well, the answer is:

"I'd try my best."

My answer didn't change a bit. As Mai's eyes widened, I insisted, "I'd try my absolute best. The plan for now is that I'm going to try as hard as I can and become even stronger. If I can do that, then I can support you."

I really had been thinking things through this past month. What if I'd always been allowed to try, and, from this day forward, I tried to become a new me? I wanted to be strong like Satsuki-san. Kind like Ajisai-san. Honest about the things I loved like Kaho-chan. And shining with an inner radiance like Mai. Those were all such lofty goals that it hurt my neck just to crane up and see them. However, I had four people there for me—four special people. It was impossible not to admire them after talking to them on a daily basis. And besides, they all liked me as I was. Sometimes I even thought I was able to help them out with stuff, and so even though I put myself down, they did uplift me—maybe a millimeter's worth, but still. I had more than just bad things to ruminate on in bed at night. Sometimes I'd score well on a test, for instance, and Satsuki-san would pay me a compliment. Or sometimes I'd make Ajisai-san laugh with a joke. Kaho-chan would choose me as her partner for group work, or Mai would smile at me. I had lots and lots of happy memories. Hidden in the murky gloom of the words I used to hurt myself with, there were *good* words too, as few as they were. And that was starting to make me happier in the long run.

It was no easy thing, as I'm sure you can imagine, for a girl who was a shut-in in junior high to stand onstage with her friends. It was impossible for me not to acknowledge that, even if only by a little. And I'd worked *really hard*, after all. I'd tried my best and put in a wild amount of effort ever since starting high school.

When your goal was to have no one hate you, you really had your work cut out for you. I really, truly didn't want to have it all come down to what other people thought of me, no matter how hard I

worked and worked and *worked.*

I wanted to change.

Hey, Amaori Renako? I said to myself. *You're going to have moments when you screw up and feel crushed. That's life. But you gotta recharge your MP and get back up. You're used to screwing up. You know what? You're going to try your best. You're going to try your best to see yourself in a better light.*

"And I'm going to keep trying my best," I told Mai. "I'll prove it to you with my actions, not just my words."

"Oh!" Mai's eyes lit up.

"Believe in me, Mai." The light that shone in her eyes turned into a drop of water that trickled down her cheek.

"I want to be your girlfriend, Mai," I said. "I don't want to be best friends or friends with Renafits. I want us to be lovers."

"Renako—"

"I really like you, Mai."

"Oh!" Mai exclaimed again, her voice full of wonder. "I never thought this day would come."

And then Mai, the one and only Oduka Mai, wept. She sobbed her eyes out, showing me the part of her she'd never ever wanted me to see.

"No," she said. "No, I care for you so much. I didn't want to give you up to Ajisai. But I also didn't want you to see all my insecurities, and I knew this was the only thing left I could do for you."

Ajisai-san put an arm around Mai's shoulders. "Uh-huh," she said. "It's all okay now, Mai. You don't need to force yourself to handle this alone anymore. It's okay."

It was my first time ever seeing this side of Mai. She was too cute, too adorable, so much so that I found myself on the verge of tears again too.

"She makes a good point," I said. "You're too obstinate. I mean, remember when you tried to throw a whole party on your own to find a partner? Talk about causing me trouble."

Ajisai-san and I grinned, and we both hugged Mai right there under the spotlight. There was something kind of amusing about seeing us all tear up like this. My heart was full of affection for Mai and Ajisai-san both. It was overflowing with this feeling of love. Just how much love did I have slumbering away within me? I love, love, loved them so much it made me cry.

"I really, really like you, Mai," I said.

"As do I. I love you, Renako."

I touched my forehead to hers and breathed in her scent as her hair fluttered around us. Finally, I'd been able to tell her the truth. And now we were lovers—another new relationship for both of us.

"Guess what, Ajisai-san?" I said. "I really like you too."

"Mm-hmm. Same here, Rena-chan. I really like you as well."

I touched my forehead to hers and felt the heat of her body against me.

"I'll make you both happy, just you wait and see. And I'll do my best to become the kind of girlfriend you both deserve," I said.

Clearly, this declaration was a prime example of me getting carried away. But right now, I couldn't hear any inner voices piping up to say, "You? What could *you* possibly do?" Because, I mean, this wasn't a promise. It was no contract. It was just a wish, a pledge to the future: here's how I plan to live my life from this day forward. Sure, I bet we'd run into tons of horrible obstacles, and there would be too many anxiety-inducing elements to count. In the first place, anyone who could date both Mai and Ajisai-san at the same time, not to mention be the kind of girlfriend "they deserved," had to be a real superwoman. Plus, I didn't know a ton about this whole jealousy thing, but people said it could eventually come along and be a really strong emotion. Maybe I wouldn't come out on top in the end. But I could cross that bridge if I ever came to it. I'd be fine. I'd screwed up a ton due to my rash decisions, but that's chill. I was used to screwing up.

Going forward, I'd be confronted with my own incompetence a million, bajillion times, and I'd always worry and fret and struggle half to death. But nevertheless, I just had to keep putting one foot forward after another through all the tears. That's all there was to it.

I'd be okay. The goal was far away, but it wasn't impossible. You know why that is? Because I was Amaori Renako, that's why—the girl they'd both fallen in love with.

Epilogue

I clutched my forehead.

Mai had managed to wrap up the show successfully after all that went down, impressing upon me just what a next-level person she was, but the issue was in what happened after that. See, it turned out that, being in the front row, Satsuki-san and Kaho-chan were close enough to hear me suggesting all three of us would date.

Thus, Kaho-chan gave me a magnificent headbutt and cried, "What the *heck*?!"

Why, oh why, hadn't Mai or Ajisai-san come to save me from her? Well, maybe I should have just been grateful that Satsuki-san hadn't attacked me too. She *was* giving me some awful looks, though. I couldn't even exchange a word with her.

I peered into the mirror in my bedroom as I spread ointment on my forehead. I sighed. "That," I said, "was wack. Completely wack."

I hadn't ever expected things to turn out like this. The three of us, dating? What kind of scumbag would even suggest such a thing?

I sighed again, deeper. I wish I could have gotten into a time machine and met my pre-Ajisai-san-asking-me-out self to tell her, "Hey, what's up? Did you know you're going to be two-timing Ajisai-san in the future? Good luck out there, kid!" I wonder how I would have reacted. Well, I'd probably have chucked a rock at myself, to be honest.

Just then, there was a pounding on my door. The sheer idiocy of the sound informed me that it was my sister.

"Heeeeeey," she said as she barged in, carrying a box. "You got a package."

"Oh!" I skidded over to her.

My sister backed away and went "Blegh," like I was a monster. I snatched the box from her arms and hugged it tight.

"Four-kun!" I cried.

"Huh?"

"You're home! Oh, my sweet Four-kun! I missed you so. I was

disconsolate without you. Oh, Four-kun, I love you so much!"

"What a weirdo," my sister said, but her rudeness didn't bother me at the moment. I was invincible with Four-kun back at my side. You could have called me Amaori Resilientko. Please, was I going to let each and every little thing get me down? Nuh-uh. I'd decided to keep trying my best, after all.

But even warriors need to take a break. I wanted to hook Four-kun up to the television ASAP, but my sister was still hanging around.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "But Seira told me to ask you to keep an eye out for her next time. What's that all about?"

"Huh?! Oh, nothing! Wait, is that because I didn't make eye contact with her that one time she dropped by? Is this her way of saying I should keep an eye on her when she talks?!"

"That wasn't my takeaway from it, but whatever. Here."

My sister held out a photo to me. Oh yeah, I'd let her borrow one. What with all the nutty things popping up recently, it'd totally slipped my mind.

"Thanks for letting me take that," she said. "That more casual photo of Oduka Mai was a big hit."

"Wait, really? I have a ton on my phone," I said.

"You do? Send me all of them!"

"No way, that'd take forever. I'm gaming now, so go away!"

I shooed her off, and my sister left, grumbling. However, I had the sneaking suspicion that she'd come gatecrash a second or third time before long in her quest for photos. That girl could get so hung up on things, after all.

Anyway, now Four-kun and I could finally have some alone time. *Heh heh heh.*

Before that, though, I started to put the picture away in my desk drawer, but then I stopped. I looked at it in silence for a few moments and then took out a picture frame from the drawer, put the photo in, and propped it up on my desk… It was a pretty good photo, all things considered.

I involuntarily broke out into a grin. While I was there, I

muttered, “Hey, you’re going to end up two-timing both Mai and Ajisai-san. It’s going to be a real ordeal. But, well, don’t give up, okay? Do the best you can out there.”

Of course, the me in the photograph didn’t respond. I flicked her with my finger. “And…you know what? It’s not by much, but hey. You’re going to like yourself more than you used to.”

The hands on the clock ticked on, and this moment, too, eventually came to pass. I looked at the three girls in the photo: Oduka Mai, Sena Ajisai, and Amaori Renako. You know, somehow…it wasn’t by a lot, mind you, but I think we looked more like we belonged together than before.

Intermission: Satsuki and Amaori 2

Satsuki

Say, Amaori.

Satsuki

If you already have two girlfriends, then what difference does it make to have one more?

Satsuki

Therefore

Satsuki

You should go out with me too.

Satsuki: Say, Amaori.

Satsuki: If you already have two girlfriends, then what difference does it make to have one more?

Satsuki: Therefore

Satsuki: You should go out with me too.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. My name is Teren Mikami.

This isn't the end of the series! We're still going! (Highlighted and bolded.)

All right, now with that important business out of the way, I'm going to talk about something a little bit serious. (There are no spoilers for Volume 4 in this.)

As I was writing this volume all the way up until I reached the end, I kept thinking, "This is going to be so controversial" and wondering how I should resolve the conflict. Why on earth did I write such a cliffhanger in Volume 3? (Because I thought it'd be funny…)

I've been working around the clock trying different things out in an effort to make a story that would be rewarding to readers who chose to read this out of many other books. However, this is a romcom about girls falling in love with other girls. I think that, for many people, this will be the first time reading a story with female/female romantic relationships. Therefore, it was important, at least for this book, for me to come up with an answer that would only work because all parties involved were girls.

As I mentioned in the afterword for Volume 1, I enjoy writing about girls in love, and I hope they'll be happiest when not held back by any taboos. Therefore! In the end, I stopped thinking about it, reread Volumes 1 through 3 multiple times, made a Renako in my mind, and let her take the reins to reach this ending. I'll take full responsibility for it, I told her. Yeah, yeah, I know light novels are supposed to go a certain way, but don't worry about that, Renako. Go do your thing.

Anyway, that's the decision I made.

There's a motif to how each character is named. The kanji in Oduka Mai's name makes her look queenly. The "tsuki" in Koto Satsuki means moon. Sena Ajisai's name is all about flowers. And Koyanagi Kaho is (redacted for spoilers). Finally, Amaori Renako's name suggests

girlhood. She's a girl who falls in love, and now I think I've written the only answer that would work for her. I hope you readers think so as well. I'll be very happy if you're even slightly satisfied with it.

At any rate, I thought I'd put together a somewhat serious afterword for the readers who've followed me up to this point, and this is how it turned out. Thanks for reading!

All right, now that each one of the main cast members has taken a turn in these four volumes, this ends the story I originally planned for this series. From Volume 5, we'll be starting season two. I'm just as interested as you are in seeing what sort of adventures these girls will have in high school.

Next up, we'll pick up on Renako flipping out thanks to that bombshell Satsuki dropped!

And now for the acknowledgments. *I'm out of room!* Thank you, everyone! Takeshima-san, I love your art!

But I'll still do my shilling! Volume 3 of the *TNFWIBYLU* manga as drawn by Musshu-sensei released in Japan on October 19. And, to Japanese readers, please look forward to my other GL romcom *AriOto*!

And with that, see you in Volume 5! Teren Mikami, signing off!

Creator Bios

AUTHOR BIO

Teren Mikami

A believer that all emotions directed from one girl to the next—affection, the desire to murder, friendship, rivalry, you name it, are classified as yuri. Thus, I desire my current supply of sweet, sweet yuri to increase five hundredfold.

My favorite seasons are winter and fall.

It's all going to be okay, because this is a Teren Mikami yuri book!

ILLUSTRATOR BIO

Eku Takeshima

An illustrator and manga artist who specializes in yuri.

I find drawing girls with little fangs really fun. Thank you, Kaho-chan!

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter

Table of Contents

Color Inserts
Table of Contents Page
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Prologue
Chapter 1: There's No Freaking Way I Can Be Buddy-Buddy with Kaho-chan!
Chapter 2: There's No Freaking Way I Can Do My First Cosplay!
Chapter 3: There's No Freaking Way I Can Do This Performance! Unless...
Minaguchi Kaho's Story
Chapter 4: There's No Freaking Way We Can Stay Like This Forever. Right?
Chapter 5 Preface: Otherwise Known as Mai's Side of the Story
Chapter 5 Volume 1: After the Party
Chapter 5 Volume 2: After the Defeat
Chapter 5 Volume 3: After Ajisai Asked Renako Out
Chapter 5 Volume 4: After the Amusement Park Date
Chapter 6: There's No Freaking Way I'll Be Your Lover! Unless…
Epilogue
Intermission: Satsuki and Amaori 2
Afterword
Creator Bios
Newsletter

Landmarks

Cover Page